CORONET
SCIENCE FICTION

THEY GAVE HIM ANOTHER MAN'S BRAIN AND FORCED HIM TO LIVE IN A STRANGER'S NIGHTMARE

LEO P. KELLEY

MINDMIX

16713

Farnsworth looked from Pete to the syringe which was filled with a murky substance. 'This,' he said, 'is molecular matter extracted from the brain of Charlotte Andrews.'

'No!' Pete shouted. 'Don't!'

'Miss Andrews,' Farnsworth continued calmly, 'was one of the world's most noted theoretical mathematicians before she died of Virus Y. You may be interested to know that this – ' Farnsworth tapped the syringe with a fingernail ' – was flown in from Seattle on Air Force One, the President's private plane. Miss Andrews had been working on a classified research project under the auspices of the Department of Defense, in which there has been much high-level interest. Now please don't move. This won't take a second.'

'I don't want – '

Farnsworth bent over and pulled up the green hospital gown. 'What you want is not our major concern. You must try to understand that. Our major concern is the project and its successful completion. It would be better for all of us if you shared our sense of priorities.'

Mindmix

Leo P. Kelley

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For Dan, fellow traveler
on the yellow brick road.

Chapter one

As he moved through the crowd that was choking the carnival midway, Pete Bratton told himself that he had no regrets. When he had joined the carnival two months ago in April, he hadn't really expected that anything very exciting would happen to change either him or his world. But he had, he now admitted to himself, hoped that something—something here in the glitter and near glory of the carnival world—might, just might, blast itself into being and help him make some sense out of things. Sometimes, walking late at night through the ocean of colored lights and hearing the carnival roaring around him, he seemed to be waiting for the wind to whirl by and whisper the secret to him or a star to fall and sear a fiery truth hitherto hidden from him on the jet ceiling of the sky. And then he would find out—he would discover some special formula that would explain everything that puzzled him about Why and What For. And then at last and for sure he would *know!*

A sharp elbow against his spine and then a blind foot crushing his own reminded him that he was here and that the carnival was closing for good tonight by order of the federal government and nothing much had happened to him. Nothing at all had really changed. He was still just Pete Bratton, the world was still the world and *oofff* as a gum-cracking woman carrying a baby plowed past him.

Pete Bratton.

He was a man of little history and most of that unrecorded anywhere. Born twenty-six years ago, mothered by a woman who changed the color of her hair as casually as she changed her lovers from time to time, fathered by a

high-rolling hustler from a logging camp who disappeared one sudden day, he grew up tall and pretty much tentative about most things, dropped out of high school in his sophomore year, impulsively joined the Marines and just as impulsively left the barren base where he was stationed and never went back. . . . And now here. Here amid the flashing lights, the pink candy floss, and glowing small-town girls, surrounded by the sounds of a carrousel, a creaking old ferris wheel, the falsely enthusiastic promises of the pitchmen, still waiting for the day to come when he would at last *know*.

Pete Bratton.

He excused himself and politely begged people's pardon as he struggled through the throng this one last time before all the red and yellow lights winked their way into a final electric oblivion and the carrousel's wild-eyed horses slowed and slowed and finally stopped for good, their familiar music ended, their manes frozen in an unseen wind, and their glossy hooves forever suspended in the empty air.

But Pete had no regrets. He knew the carnival always came with the tree's rising sap and went away when the first leaves began to fall. He had known it wouldn't last, wasn't meant to, when he joined it. Nothing, he knew, did. He had known that when he took the job as Bozo—HIT THE BULL'S-EYE AND GIVE BOZO A BATH!—back there two months ago in April. And even if no leaves littered the ground yet, the carnival was closing tonight. It would have closed eventually anyway, and Pete had known he would have to leave it and move on, his questions unanswered, but his eagerness to ask them undiminished. Perhaps someone in the next town next week or next year—maybe a pale but pretty girl with her long hair tied back by a leather thong—would turn out to be the one to whisper all the answers to him in a strange gypsy language in a dark room, and he would at last know everything there was to know about What For and Why. There was always tomorrow, he reminded himself, and all the towns. If he kept his eyes wide open, well, who could predict what he might

see, what surprising things he might discover in the wide world all around him.

A new sound suddenly invaded the midway. For a moment Pete thought it was just another pitchman and, in a way, it was. The new sound rippled out of a transistor radio held tight by a teenager against one invisible ear. Pete, watching the boy, wondered how the hell the sound got out of the thing. Probably through the kid's other uncovered ear.

"—people stricken in every state of the nation. Congress remains in emergency session. The President has left Washington for an undisclosed destination. Citizens are advised to stay tuned to this Civil Defense station for periodic updatings on the progress of the sickness officially designated Virus Y by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. We repeat that all public gatherings, except those of an emergency nature, are banned effective at midnight tonight. Dr. James Farnsworth of Crisis Control Center has asked any citizen possessing knowledge of the cause or cure of Virus Y to get in touch with him immediately in New York City. Dr. Farnsworth's telephone number is—"

"She-eet!" the boy snarled and shook his radio furiously. He angrily turned the dial and fragments of other voices shrilled additional information concerning Armageddon. In disgust he threw the radio to the ground and silenced it with one swift kick.

"Yo, Bratton!"

Pete tried to turn around as his name was called, but he found himself wedged between a fat farmer and a pouting girl carrying a garishly painted plaster panda she had won at one of the booths. "Excuse me, ma'am," he said to the girl. She ignored him and continued to stare up in dull awe at the bright banners over the ten-in-one: The Fattest Woman in the World, The Pinheads . . .

He eased himself backward, and as he did so, the girl and the farmer slid together in a soundless collision. He turned in the direction of the loud voice that was still shouting his name in the gaudy night.

"Bratton!"

Pete raised his arm and waved as he spotted Big Bronco Klinger about thirty yards away, slashing his way through the mob.

Now why was Bronco heading away from him? Pete wondered. He was about to call out to him when a cluster of snickering adolescent boys in woolly pullovers and shiny chino slacks engulfed him and he temporarily lost sight of Bronco.

The boys swirled on toward the girlie show, and Pete made his way toward Bronco, who was striding huge-footed and frowning toward a slender man with shoulders as perfectly formed as the graceful slope of his neck between the base of his skull and the muscles of his strong young back. The man faced away from the approaching Bronco. His hair glinted almost white under the spotlights above the midway's main entrance.

"Bratton," Bronco began, "they want your ass over to the—" He stopped, his hand sliding down and away from the young man's shoulder as the man turned, anger erupting in his eyes, and said something soft and rustling.

"Sorry, bo'," Bronco apologized. "I thought you was a friend of mine. You looked from the back just like a guy what works here. No need for you to get feeling mean now. It was just a mistake, an honest-to-God mistake is all. See ya around."

Pete let out a low whistle and shook his head in surprise. Why, Bronco thought that good-looking guy was me, he told himself. Now don't that beat all! But that guy don't look much like me. Sure, he's got light hair just about the length of mine, and he's just about my height but I'm—

What?

Pete watched the young man who was watching Bronco back away into the crowd. Do I look like him, he asked himself. I was mistaken once for one of those movie stars, forget which one now. He noticed that Bronco was moving off.

"Hey, Big Bronco," he yelled, grinning and waving at his friend. "It's me! I'm over here!"

He tried to move toward Bronco, but the press of the crowd turned him aside. As if it were governed by some powerful but senseless force, the crowd moved first this way and then that. Pete raised himself up on his toes and scanned its uneven surface. Bronco was over there to the left. An apologetic push and a few mild shoves, and Pete reached him.

"Never did see so many marks on the midway before. Did you, Bronco?"

"Closing night is like ripe cheese," Bronco muttered. "Brings 'em out like starved mice. Where the hell you been?"

"Why, right here." Pete indicated the midway.

"Lissen, Mr. Pratling he wants you to haul your ass over to the Bozo joint right away."

"You sure? Because last month he said I didn't have what it takes to be a Bozo. He said I—well, if you really want to know, he said I had me too sweet a disposition."

Bronco's guffaw was the sound of an automobile backfire, and it possessed as much joy. "That's real rich, that is. But he's right. I watched you a coupla times up there on the perch. You couldn't insult the marks worth a damn. And insultin's the name of the Bozo game. You *gotta* insult the marks. You don't, they just ain't gonna put down their two bits for three balls. You gotta get 'em mad, Bratton. That way, once they're good and mad, they want to see you—see Bozo, I mean—get it. That there's the whole point. They get mad, they want to hit the bull's-eye and dunk Bozo in the tank."

"Well, I tried. I remember though, there was this one fella. Old guy, he was. He had a scar on his face. Only it didn't seem fair for me to make fun of that scar. Maybe it wasn't his fault that he got it. I figured I didn't have no right making fun of him on account of it. But there wasn't anything else about him that I could latch on to."

Bronco shook his head in disgust and shoved a retaliatory elbow into the ribs of a man struggling to get past him.

"I guess I better get over to the Bozo joint and see what

Mr. Pratling wants." Pete ran a hand across his forehead. He blinked several times.

Bronco narrowed his eyes and said, "What's the matter with you. You sick or something?"

Pete managed a weak grin. "No. Got a funny feeling, all of a sudden. Felt sort of dizzy."

Bronco took a step backward. "You got the sickness? You got it, boy, you stay the hell away from me!"

"I don't think so. I forgot to eat lunch today and I only had a donut and some coffee at the cook tent this morning. My belly probably thinks my throat's been cut."

As Pete turned to go, Bronco caught his arm. "Listen, kid. What are you gonna do when the show folds tonight? You got anything planned for after?"

"Planned? Me? No, I got nothing planned. Why?"

"Now don't get me wrong. I ain't making you no promises or nothing like that. But I figure a young guy like you, a guy with your good looks *and* sweet disposition—" Bronco paused, laughed to make sure Pete got the joke, and then went on. "A guy like you and a guy like me, we could maybe do okay together. We could work the old key game together. We could go to towns where they got conventions—Elks, Shriners, like that. Lots of guys around at times like that lookin' for a little nookey on the loose."

"I almost forgot," Pete said suddenly. "I came out here to get Mitzi a lemon ice. She's real bad off tonight, and she told me how much she used to like lemon ices when she was a kid, so I said I'd come on out here and buy her one."

"That old bat won't last the night. She's got the sickness real good. Mr. Pratling had to strap her down all last week while she was going through the worst stages. I told him, 'Mr. Pratling', I said, 'you oughta get her off the lot before she infects us all.' But he said she didn't have no family and no place to go, so he had no choice. You better stay away from her, Bratton. She'll give you the sickness. Let her get her own lemon ice."

"I used to see you and her working the con," Pete said.

"Yeah, we did all right. I'd spot a mark with a fat wal-

let, and I'd talk to him and sell him the key to Mitzi's room in a motel out on the highway.

"The point is, I sold that key twenty, thirty times a night to twenty, thirty different guys at ten bucks apiece. Only none of 'em ever got to slip a dick to Mitzi, because I buy those keys by the gross and they don't fit no lock I know of. Now like I was saying before, you and me, we could latch on to some broad in a convention town, and you could pretend to sell her room key to the marks. We'd split the take three ways. Fair enough?"

"Well, I got nothing particular in mind for after the show closes. I appreciate you offering, Bronco, I really do. I've always been pretty much on my own, but it would be nice to have a buddy to be with."

"The marks would believe whatever you told 'em, Bratton. You got that believable look. So, you think it over some, kid. You got to do something. And you ain't gonna qualify for no food stamps or welfare, not a guy like you, who's always on the move."

Pete parted from Bronco and walked down the midway, which was less crowded now because the girlie show was on and the ten-in-one was operating and most of the people were in one or the other of the two tents. When he reached the booth where he had once worked as Bozo, only Sol, the pitchman, was there. The perch above the tank of water was empty. No marks stood in front of the booth.

"Hiya, Sol. Mr. Pratling said he wanted me over here."

Sol squinted up at Pete. "The kid that was supposed to work this shift never showed. Can't blame the bastard. He's probably home shivering in some stinking closet, waiting for the sickness to grab him. Mr. Pratling wants you to work the perch for the last few hours before we close up for good."

Pete hesitated. But it was something to do. It would pass the time. And maybe tonight nobody would notice that he wasn't the best insulter old Sol had ever had up there on his perch. People had other things on their minds tonight. One thing mainly—the sickness that had suddenly struck the country and the world. That's what they all had

on their minds, Pete knew. And that's why they walked too fast and laughed too loud and sometimes looked back over their shoulders as if they thought somebody was following them. And somebody was all right, and that somebody's name was Death.

The carnival was a refuge, a facade behind which they could take shelter for a time, a barrier to reality and the unknown and always fatal sickness that was a part of that reality now. They threw their hoops to win the junk the pitchmen called slum and they aimed their darts at the balloons and they bet on the number of the hole they hoped the mouse would run into when the roulette wheel stopped spinning, and they almost believed they were safe. In a world where girls paraded bare-assed down a runway, in a world where a woman sported a beard you couldn't pull off, in a world where brilliant colored lights rainbowed everyone's face—who could tell what was really real?

"Pete, boy," Sol said sadly, shaking his old head from side to weary side. "You going to stand out there all night just dreaming? Or are you going to do what Mr. Pratling says you should do?"

Pete was jerked backward into now. "Sorry, Sol. I'll get right on up there. I'll just go and get me my wetsuit and make up like Bozo, and then I'll be back and right up there."

And he was sprinting away from the booth, his blond hair flying out behind him, his lean legs leaping across the tawdry sawdust as if it were clover and he a young satyr who had just glimpsed a nymph in a nearby bower.

"Shake it, boy!" Sol yelled after him through hands cupped around his mouth. "We only got three more hours." He watched until Pete disappeared in the crowd. "Three more hours," he repeated softly to himself. "And then what?"

Mr. Pratling had wanted Pete to haul his ass over to the Bozo booth, as Bronco had put it. So Pete had hauled his ass. Sol, weary of too many years and all the desperate faces on the other side of his booth night after night, had

wanted Pete to shake it so that he could make a few bucks in the three hours remaining before the show closed for good. So Pete had shaken it.

As Pete began to apply the red and white makeup that transformed his face into someone named Bozo, it didn't occur to him to question whether or not he should haul his ass as Mr. Pratling had wanted or shake it as Sol had wanted. He simply did it. He was obliging and cooperative, and many people in the past had been glad he was so easy to get along with.

That was because Pete had learned one important but terrible truth a long time ago. Once when he was ten years old, his mother, Inez, wanted him to go to the grocery store for a can of Spam. Pete was in the yard of the little house Inez and the high-rolling logger, Jerry Bratton, had rented out on the western edge of Boise. He was playing touch football with several older boys, and the miracle involved in the game for him was the amazing fact that they —the older and bigger boys—had let him play at all. Usually he was ignored by his peers and scorned by those older or bigger than he was.

"Petey, I want you to go get me a can of Spam, you hear me?"

That was Inez at the open window in her low-cut blouse with her boobs (as Mickey Rykeyser later said aloud in Pete's presence) hanging out for the whole goddam neighborhood to see.

"In a minnit!"

"Now!"

Ralph Scott was making an end run with the football held tight against his chest, and Pete saw his chance. Even though it was supposed to be only touch football, some demon possessed him, and he leaped to the left, his body an arrow, his arms outstretched, and, for a long and almost endless moment his arms and Ralph Scott's legs entwined and were the whole triumphant world. Down went Ralph and up went a whoop from the other boys.

"That little bastard almost killed me!" Ralph complained a moment later.

Pete sat up, let go of Ralph's legs, and grinned. At first

all he heard were the comments of all the other boys, all older, all bigger than he was.

"Like a shot out of a gun!"

"Didja see Petey down him? Didja? Didja see that squirt *tackle?*"

And then another sound—sobs. The sky falling.

Inez, crying. Wailing to the world and the inhabitants of all the neighboring houses about her ungrateful son and how she slaved eight hours a day in the diner to keep him in decent clothes and nourishing food and what did she get for it? Ingratitude, that's what she got. Oh, she might as well be dead. She might as well have birthed a monster as the thing she did.

Pete got up and ran to her, stricken by her pain and feeling guilty in every ounce of his flesh for what he had done to her. He ran inside the house and patted her wet face and promised to go to the store and get the Spam or whatever it was she wanted right away, right now this minute, because he didn't care about football, honest, and would she please stop crying? Please?

Scarlet paint on his lips, making them huge, making them smile even when he wasn't smiling underneath . . .

Such was the ignominious end to this moment of glory. Striding fast past the still staring football boys to the grocery store while his mother waved from the window, her change purse rattling in her hand, her words echoing in the chambers of his worried mind, "Be a good boy for Mama, so she'll love you forever and ever and ever. Don't make Mama cry, Petey. Be a good boy, promise? That's a darling. Don't forget the change. Now run, you sweet thing!"

Coming home with a brown paper sack in one hand and some hot coins clutched in the other, through the empty back yard from which all the boys had flown like nervous birds, already forgetting that little Petey Bratton had tackled—*tackled!*—Ralph Scott, who weighed a good twenty pounds more than Petey did and who was said to have actually screwed a girl silly once.

Afraid of those terrible tears, seeking at all costs to

avoid the torment of guilt for having caused them, Pete never was totally sure when he might do something to make them start again, so he did what he was told, and his mama loved him.

When his father, who never cried, told Pete that no guy with guts let himself or his family be insulted by anybody, Pete had no choice but to pick a fight with Mickey Rykeyser the following week. Because Mickey had referred to Inez's boobs hanging out the window for everyone in the neighborhood to see and Pete had unwisely asked his father what boobs were and it had all come tumbling out. A bloody nose and a sprained finger had been a small price to pay, Pete reasoned, if they prevented his father's frowns. Like his mother's tears, his father's frowns tore something important up by the roots within him and crushed it cruelly underfoot. By the time he was twelve years old, Pete had come to understand that people loved you if you were good and didn't want you around them if you were bad. The trick, of course, was to find out quick what each particular person thought was good and what they thought was bad, and from then on the rest was real easy.

Black croquet hoops for eyebrows, giving the mask that hid the man beneath it a perpetual look of startled élan . . .

When he was forced to join the First True Baptist Church (Inez had felt he needed something extra after Jerry Bratton disappeared, something special the guys who befriended her in the diner and later bedded her at home couldn't provide), Pete found confirmation of this theory.

A fat woman who stuttered and carried a ruler as she strode up and down the aisle during Sunday school told him all about Jesus. "Now there was su-su-somebody," Pete heard her say as her head bobbed and her chins jiggled and her eyes gleamed. "Walked on water, He did. Turned wa-water into wa-wine. Raised the dead. Cured the lepers." Pete decided that Miss Lee Anne Tremayne wished she had been around to see it all—the water run-

ning red as blood, the bare feet walking easy over the [illegible]

She told her class that Jesus loved all his little lambs. It took Pete some Sundays to discover that she didn't really mean lambs—she meant ordinary people just like him. She told the class about Pontius Pilate and how he had washed his hands. She described the ascent to Calvary and the old rugged cross. Pete dreamed about nails that night, dreamed of the awful sound of hammers, and woke up moaning, his body soaked with perspiration.

At first he couldn't understand why He let them do it to Him. Why didn't He fight back? Why didn't His gang help him escape? That's the way it always was in the John Wayne movies he loved to watch. And He had eleven guys on his side (you couldn't count that one that had turned him in to the law). Thinking hard on it down in the coal cellar while he tried to smoke a cigarette without coughing his lungs out, Pete came to the conclusion that He had planned the whole thing just the way it turned out. He had *wanted* it that way because He knew that the people at the time—those Pharisees—wanted it that way. And He had gone and let them do it to Him. Proof? While his cigarette burned forgotten in his fingers, Pete realized with a thrill—like the thrill mountain climbers experience when the summit is reached—that He had gotten love in return. Miss Lee Anne had said so. "Love Him," she told Pete, "and He will love you. Don't do any sus-su-su-sinning to hurt Him, or He'll put you in the huh-huh-hellfire forever. You listening to me, Peter?"

So there it all was, just as plain. That old Jesus sure had it all figured out. Just as Pete had it figured out not too long after Inez had had her crying jag, which he had come to realize had been faked good and proper. Pete and Jesus had figured out how to get people to love them—or at least like them a whole lot: do what people wanted, say the words they wanted to hear . . .

Pete dreamed one night that a man who looked a lot like John Wayne nailed him to a tree because he wouldn't reveal which way the cattle drive had headed. The next

day he told Inez he wasn't going to Sunday school anymore. When she asked him why, obviously getting her waterworks ready to gush, he told her that Miss Lee Anne Tremayne had tried to put her hand between his legs. He made Inez promise not to do or say anything. He just wouldn't go back. Inez said she understood, and he wasn't to worry about it.

Pete had no more need of Him. Jesus had nothing more to teach him. Neither did Miss Lee Anne. Although at times, Pete wondered at his unexpected lie; it had surprised him totally as it tumbled from between his teeth, and he sometimes wondered too how Miss Lee Anne's five fat fingers would feel squirming hot and eager between his tense thighs . . .

On his head, over his ears, an idiotically orange fright wig . . .

His tense thighs . . . which reminded him . . .

He was sitting in English class in his sophomore year in high school, trying to put words together to make sentences and sense . . .

"Those of you who have not finished your themes will complete them in study hall and bring them to class tomorrow morning. Peter Bratton, I'm confident that category includes you."

Pete looked up at the mouse of a man lurking behind his desk at the front of the room. "Yes, sir, Mr. Feinberg, that sure does mean me."

Several girls swung their curls and giggled.

"Peter, on second thought," Mr. Feinberg was saying as his eyes watered behind his bifocals, "stay a moment after class. I have something I want to discuss with you."

"Yes, sir."

Mr. Feinberg said he wanted to discuss Pete's obvious problem with the English language. It seemed, he said, between sniffs caused by his spring cold, that Pete failed to see the connection between words and thoughts. "Words are the sentinels of our thoughts, Peter. Now I believe you are a reasonably intelligent young man behind that re-

served pose you present to the world. Possibly sensitive as well. Possibly. Let me see how you're doing."

Pete handed him the paper he had been holding until the right moment.

Mr. Feinberg took it, but his pale eyes remained on Pete. Like an appraising garment merchant, he examined Pete's short-sleeved cotton shirt, the heavy leather belt looped through his faded Levis, his slickly shining boots, and then Mr. Feinberg's gaze swooped suddenly upward to the triangle of white T-shirt showing at Pete's throat, where delicate blond hairs crept out and curled.

Pete waited.

"Well." Mr. Feinberg remembered the paper and shook it as if he wanted to scare some sense into the words written on it.

"Somebody I Respect." After reading the theme's title, Mr. Feinberg pushed his glasses up on his nose and went on reading aloud. "John Wayne is somebody I respect very much. He is strong, and everybody knows they could trust him. He is in the movies a lot and rides horses perfect."

"That is as far as you got, Peter? What seems to be the trouble?"

Pete wanted Mr. Feinberg to like him. He knew that Mr. Feinberg liked Stella Zuwicki because she wrote poetry and read books. Pete had tried to read a book by Jack London once, but he couldn't get past the first chapter. It just didn't seem to have anything at all to do with him or his life. He couldn't understand what people like Stella got out of books or why they thought it was so wonderful to make words rhyme.

"Do you really respect John Wayne, Peter?"

"Yes, sir. He's—he's—" Words again. Treacherous damn things that couldn't be trusted to help you out of a spot or to explain your real feelings.

"I take it you know Mr. Wayne personally?"

"Oh, no, sir. I never actually met him, but I seen most of his movies."

A sigh from Mr. Feinberg. "You can't respect someone

you don't know, young man. That is a simple truth and a fact that should be obvious to you. You are confusing Mr. Wayne with the characters he portrays. Cowboys, trail bosses, gunfighters. Are these the kind of people you say you respect?"

"No. I wrote what I meant down there." Pete pointed to the paper in Mr. Feinberg's hand. "I meant John Wayne."

Mr. Feinberg had the habit of edging close to the person to whom he was speaking. He moved closer to Pete now, peering at him through his bifocals. Pete had to step back. And then, only a moment later, step back again.

"Take me, for example," Mr. Feinberg was saying—whispering actually. "You couldn't respect me unless you really knew me, could you, Peter? It takes close human contact to generate respect and, I might well add, love."

"John Wayne, he—"

"Never mind about him!" Mr. Feinberg waved the paper nervously in front of him. "What is it you want, Peter? I mean, what are you going to do with your life? Girls? I suppose you'll get married and have children—a house somewhere, a job you'll hate."

Did Mr. Feinberg want him to want those things? Pete wondered. Probably so. "Girls don't pay all that much attention to me."

Mr. Feinberg expressed genuine surprise.

"It's true. I'm too dumb for them. I don't say the right things. I don't dance so good. But it's mostly the dumb things I say."

"There are ways of communicating without words," Mr. Feinberg said, moving still closer to Pete and placing a ringed white finger on his bare forearm. "I'll bet you have lots of friends, don't you?"

Before Pete could answer, Mr. Feinberg said, "Are you going home now? I'll drive you home."

The early evening of autumn slipped down upon them as they drove. Pete found himself feeling distinctly uncomfortable, sitting in a car with a teacher. Mr. Feinberg belonged to a world he didn't really know or understand. He couldn't imagine Mr. Feinberg getting up in the morning

and brushing his teeth just like other people. Pete didn't notice where they were going until Mr. Feinberg parked his car behind an abandoned warehouse on the south side of town.

He was looking at Pete from behind the barriers of his bifocals and the wetness on his cheeks was not the result of irritated sinuses. "I can't!" he moaned. "I just can't! I have a respectable job. It's a sacred trust. I *mustn't!*"

"Sure, Mr. Feinberg. Being a teacher must be one of the greatest jobs in the world."

"It's agony, that's what it is."

Pete's muscles tightened. He wondered if he should tell Mr. Feinberg that he intended to get married later on. It might help because he was pretty sure that Mr. Feinberg was crying.

"Every day I talk about transitive verbs and participles and compound clauses, and I stand up there in the front of the room, and the words come out, but I keep looking down at those strong young legs in slacks, sprawled out toward me to tempt me. I think of zippers and the sliding sound they make all the while I'm talking about prepositions. My head hurts. I *ache!* Did you know that Nils Johanssen scratches his genitals all through class? He drives me out of my mind!"

Pete had nothing to say. Not even when Mr. Feinberg's hand, a wayward traveler on a desperate journey, came to rest on his thigh, could he think of a thing to say. Because now he knew and the knowing paralyzed him because he didn't want to do or say anything that would make Mr. Feinberg start crying again.

"It's dark, and no one will see us, Peter. *Peter!* Even your name . . ." Mr. Feinberg took off his glasses and carefully placed them on the dashboard. Because his hands were shaking, the glasses clattered against it and almost fell. "It won't matter to you, Peter. You have your whole life yet to live. You'll forget all about me and go on. I won't hurt you. You'll enjoy it. But you've got to promise me you won't tell anyone. At my last school—in Gary, Indiana—there was this stunning young stallion—he *told!* I

lost my job, but nothing happened to him. They thought he was a *hero* for telling, for saving their sons from me! But I'll tell you something. He came prowling around my house night after night. My mother was there! I had to pretend that I was tutoring him. He was so brazen after that first time. But I had some honor left. So I flunked him as he deserved. That's why he told. He wanted revenge! Peter, you won't—you wouldn't—"

"I can keep a secret as good as anybody, I guess."

Air rushed from between Mr. Feinberg's lips, and his hands went wild. As his head came down, his hands pushed Pete's legs apart, and Pete felt the warmth and the moisture and the urgent and automatic surging of his own pelvis. He kept his eyes on the sign flashing at the distant end of the dark street. DINE AND DA—The message unfinished, cut off by the crumbling wall of the warehouse. Pete looked down at the man kneeling on the floor of the car and then quickly up at the sign again.

When the melancholy ritual ended, Mr. Feinberg gasped and got up. He caught his breath and reached for his glasses. They fell to the floor.

Pete bent down and picked them up. "They're okay. They're not broken or anything." He handed them to the trembling man behind the wheel.

Mr. Feinberg put on his glasses and drove Pete home. When they arrived at Pete's house, he said, "You're a good boy, Peter. Perhaps—perhaps you'll want to come to visit me and my mother some evening. She's a charming woman. You'd like her. We could work on your English together."

But Pete was already halfway up the walk to his house, and a month later when Mr. Feinberg did not appear in class as usual, he waited for word of what happened, and it finally came. Nils Johanssen had told the principal that Mr. Feinberg had tried to rape him in the gym locker room. Pete listened to Nils describe to a bunch of guys what Fag Feinberg, as Nils called him, had tried to do to him. Pete, getting madder as the story became more lurid, swore at Nils and told him to watch where the hell he was

walking. Nils said he hadn't stepped on Pete's foot. Pete insisted he damn well had. He punched Nils in the gut—twice—even though Nils hadn't stepped on his foot at all.

Easing his lean body into the rubber wetsuit and then slipping the clown suit over it, pulling on the floppy, oversized shoes and the enormous white gloves with the funny padded fingers . . .

Out of the trailer and onto the back lot went an apparition wearing a bright red smile and a polka-dotted one-piece suit. With it went another apparition whose name was Pete Bratton. The Bratton apparition was not smiling under the paint on his face. He was thinking of Mitzi, who had spent the past week strapped down like a frenzied animal in its polluted lair as the sickness shredded her and she screamed her delusionary messages to the world from behind the ten-in-one tent. Many of the marks out front had thought it was the wild Man of New Guinea screaming, or they hoped it was the geek who was bellering his brains out for a live chicken so he could bite its head off. But Pete and the pitchman for the freak show and Mr. Pratling, standing over in the dutch doorway of the ticket wagon, knew it was only faded Mitzi, nothing at all as glamorous as a geek or a Wild Man.

Now what the hell am I thinking about Mitzi for, Pete wondered. He knew the answer. Because I feel light-headed. And that's how it begins—the sickness. I got it from her. Sure as anything, I got it from her! The thought alarmed him because the sickness was always fatal and he was young and hadn't had a chance to live very much yet, being busy and always on the move. Death had no damn right to tap him on the shoulder and give him the high sign, no damn right at all.

His lightheadedness wasn't from not eating as he had told Bronco. He'd eaten sausages and wheatcakes for breakfast and had soup and half a loaf of bread for lunch.

He lurched as he reached for the rear door of the Bozo booth, and for a moment he thought he was going to vomit. He counted to ten and then promised himself he wouldn't go back to see Mitzi because she had the sickness and so she ought to understand.

Then he was inside the dirty booth and climbing up the small ladder and slithering out onto the perch that ran across the booth above the tank of cold water.

"Hey, ladies and gentlemen!" Sol's voice raked the field of the night. "Hey, hey, and *hoo*-ray, because Bozo's back! Now who will be the first to buy three balls for only a quarter and give Bozo the bath he needs?"

The clown on his perch smiled and smiled while Pete Bratton used mind over matter, trying to quell the giddiness that was causing the tank below him to whirl in shrinking circles.

The first ball came flying toward him, and he stared through the protective mesh and saw the face of Death with a big cigar stuck between his lips, winding up for a second toss because the first one had missed the bull's-eye down below by a country mile or two.

Another miss. Another.

Sol began to fidget, glancing at the marks beyond the booth and then back at Pete. "Hold it, sir!" he called out to the man with the ball in his hand. "Let me adjust that bull's-eye to give you a real sporting chance." He hurried to the rear of the booth and, when he was in front of the tank and beneath Pete's dangling legs, muttered, "Listen up, you bastard! Don't just sit there like a goddam deaf and dumber! *Yell* at them out there! Say something!"

He returned to the front of the booth, glancing back over his shoulder and grumbling.

"Hey, that lady there!" Pete yelled, referring to the redheaded woman standing beside the man with the cigar who was not Death after all. "She sure don't look like your wife to me."

The man's eyes narrowed.

"She looks like somebody you picked up down on State Street. That's what she looks like to me from up here."

Fury sent the ball hurtling toward the bull's-eye, and when it connected, the perch split in half, and the clown splashed down into the tank.

"Good for you, Eddie!" the redhead yelled and returned Sol's pleased smile. "That'll teach him to badmouth me!"

Pete, shivering in the cold water, gripped the sides of the tank. He started to haul himself up, slipped back, tried again and managed to get one leg over the side, then the other one . . .

He fell forward onto the dirt floor. He felt the loose gravel beneath his cheek, and he knew he should move, but he also knew he couldn't. A dizziness seized him, and he felt that he weighed less than five pounds. He raised his head slightly and saw . . .

"*Death!*" he screamed. "You there with that cigar. Stay *back!*"

The marks became quiet, barely moving. This was part of the act, wasn't it? Sol ordered Bozo to get back up on the perch, giving the crowd a reassuring smile. But when Bozo continued to cry out his deluded monologue with the man he thought was Death, Sol and the marks simultaneously realized what was happening.

"The sickness!" someone shouted. "Bozo's got it!"

"Get outta our way," the cigar chewing man muttered, grabbing his redhead's arm and fighting his way through the crowd.

"Virus Y!" a shrill female voice bleated.

"Hey, wait!" Sol called after his fleeing customers. "I'll give you *four* balls for a quarter! A real bargain, I'll give you. Tonight only!" Then he turned and looked down in despair at the shuddering clown who had fainted on the ground.

"Why'd you have to go and ruin my last night? Why'd you do that, you no-good sonofabitch?"

Bronco appeared on the other side of the booth. "What's got into all the marks, Sol? What the hell happened over here? They're running out of the lot like the place was on fire!"

Sol gestured fiercely. "It's him. He's got it."

"The sickness?"

Sol nodded. "You better get him out of here. Put him in with Mitzi or someplace, only get him the hell out of here!"

"Bronco," Bozo murmured, holding out a weak, wet hand.

"He's your buddy," Sol said. "So, help him—"

Bronco was shaking his head and backing quickly away from the booth. "He's no buddy of mine, not when he's got the sickness, he ain't!"

Chapter two

It took Pete more than an hour to drag himself along the graveled ground of the Bozo booth and then across the back lot to the door of Mitzi's trailer. She'd be wondering he thought dimly, why he hadn't kept his promise and brought her the lemon ice she'd wanted so bad. Besides, she was his only friend on the lot—not counting Bronco—and she was sick and needed him—or someone.

At one point during the terrible trip, as the sickness seared him and the stars stared senselessly overhead, he slumped to the ground and lay there, listening dully to the cry of crickets at some impossible distance as he tried to draw his breath without pain. And then he continued his journey, sometimes rising up, sometimes struck down by a weakness that destroyed his equilibrium and nearly ended his will to go on.

At last, he reached the unlocked door of Mitzi's trailer. He put both hands on the doorknob and pulled himself up onto the first of the three steps leading to the trailer. His oversized clown shoes tricked him, and he fell. It took him ten minutes to pull the shoes from his feet and once again begin the tortuous ascent. Finally, leaning against the door frame, he managed to turn the knob and swing the door open.

Keeping his hands pressed flat against the wall of the trailer for support, he made his way toward the bed he could barely see in the weak light flowing into the trailer. As he fell upon it, he heard his name spoken.

"Pete?" A gusty sound, a consonantal breeze. "Pete, is that you?"

But he was instantly asleep and wandering lazily in a

land where women at wide open windows waved to him and pointed with pride to their huge breasts flopping like overfed flounders on the sills beneath. Down crimson and curved roadways he went, past stadiums where no games that he knew were being played, and on through vibrating mists and into blazing sunsets, riding on a horse that fled toward the sun as if that sky-high brazen disk were the brass ring it had passed so many other times. Fever was a second skin over stiff bones that strained and fought an enemy they could not see or comprehend, which whispered seductively to him about surrender . . .

When he awoke several hours later, it was because someone was again (still?) calling his name. He immediately became conscious of his sweat-slicked face and the overpowering heat of his body. Unable to remember for a moment where he was or why, he ran his hands over his face and felt his body, which he couldn't see in the darkness. It was clearly his own but in some strange way unfamiliar. The polka-dotted clown rig and the wetsuit beneath it—these garments hid him from himself. He had to get back to the Bozo joint . . . Sol was waiting . . . Mr. Pratling had ordered him to . . . where was he? . . . was this his trailer? . . . where then, if it was, was his buddy Bronco?

"Pete?" The voice feathered the air, barely a whisper, more of a moan.

The sound of his name spoken this way in the darkness by someone he could not see caused him to feel a fear that was a flower rooted in no known soil and nourished by some dark star's light. And then, remembering, feeling a thin joy as he recognized the voice that had spoken, "Mitzi, hi. It's me."

A sigh in response and then silence.

Remembering now his mission of countless hours ago, feeling shame at its failure—what had happened to him?—he said, "Oh, shit, Mitzi, I didn't get your lemon ice."

"It doesn't matter, hon. I couldn't eat an ice now. I

can't keep anything down anymore. Is the show closed down for good?"

He told her he didn't know for sure, but he guessed it was. While he talked in the dark to the woman he could not see, he remembered that he had been sick. But now as he sat up on the unmade bed, he felt only a weariness like a mild hangover without the ugly increment of remorse for having drunk too much and probably made a fool of oneself in the bad bargain.

"Why don't you go away with the rest of them?" Mitzi asked him.

Well, now, he thought, that's a good question. "I got sick last night," he told her, not really answering her question.

There was the soft sound of stirring in the bed at the other end of the trailer. "Sick? You got it, too?"

"I guess maybe I might have had it, but I don't now. At least, I don't think I do." He felt his arms and legs as if checking some product on an assembly line. "It's gone now. I feel pretty good, considering."

"Then you couldn't have had the sickness. It don't go away. It—kills. You know that, Pete. They got no cure for it. What you had was probably one too many boilermakers, you and that buddy of yours, that Bronco."

"No, it wasn't that. Honest, Mitzi, I think I really had the bug. I was working as Bozo because Mr. Pratling, he wanted me to, and I got dunked, and then I passed out. Hey, I'll put on the light and then go back out and see if I can scare us up a coupla ices."

"No!"

"You sure you don't want an ice anymore?"

"Don't put on the light. Before it got dark—I saw myself. Don't put it on, Pete."

"Okay. But you ought to eat something. You got to keep up your strength."

The sound of Mitzi's cracked laughter horrified him. It made him recall the noise the geek made deep in his throat when they threw the live chicken down into the pit with him. "Mitzi?"

"Pete, honey, you tell lousy jokes. No, they aren't jokes. What they are is lies. You know I'm going to die. You know that! Repeat after me, Pete: Mitzi—Mitzi, the Mod Mistress, as they called her—has bumped her last bump and ground her last grind. Little old Mitzi is going into the Great Beyond, where she'll twitch her tail for all the angels and snap her snatch in the face of old Saint Peter himself. Mitzi's finished. Say it, Pete. Don't tell me no more of your lovely lies like you been doing all week. I don't have the strength to believe them anymore."

Pete sat helplessly on the edge of the bed as she cried, a series of short shocking gasps, and then he got up and made his way in the dark toward the sound, knowing he had to say or do something to make her stop. *"Goddam!"*

"Pete? What happened?"

"Banged my kneebone on something!"

He sat down on Mitzi's bed and fumbled about until he found her hand. He almost dropped it again when he felt the crystalline web that covered it, where only earlier in the day there had been ordinary flesh.

"See, I told you," she moaned. "I've changed. It's the last stage, that's for sure." The thought evidently amused her, because she said, "The last stage. Boy, isn't that the truth now? This old trailer's the last stage for Mitzi."

Pete, still sweating, thought for an unusual moment about himself. "Listen, if you don't mind, I'm going to take off these here clothes I got on. I still got on the Bozo outfit and the wetsuit underneath. You happen to have an extra bathrobe or something around here that I could put on?"

"In the closet. Take whatever you want."

When Pete had stripped off the polka dots and rubber, he found a terrycloth robe in the closet and belted it around his waist. He immediately felt cooler and returned to sit on the edge of Mitzi's bed.

"You know," she said, "I sure hope I get to see the sun come up just one more time. Did you ever really look at a sunrise, Pete? I mean really *look* at it?"

"Hell, the last time I saw the sun come up was when I was riding the rails out of Cincinnati, and there was this

wino in the boxcar with me who had diarrhea something awful, so I dropped off—couldn't stand the stink anymore. It was just outside of Lexington, Kentucky, where I landed. The sun was coming up that time, I remember. But as a rule, I sleep as late as I can."

"Once when I was a kid, my ma and pa took us kids to the seashore early one Saturday morning. My ma, I remember she said there was supposed to be a cure in the water that day on account of the Blessed Virgin. I think it was the day of the Immaculate Conception or something like that. Anyway, it was in August, and we got there real early before the crowds. The sun was coming up out there on the edge of the ocean, and it was really beautiful, let me tell you. But that was a long time ago—maybe thirty years ago."

Pete could think of nothing to say. He knew Mitzi was dying, and he was sorry as hell, but he couldn't think of anything that seemed proper or fitting to say. It was different here and now, where death was for real and not like in any of the movies he'd ever seen. In the movies the women who were dying—Bette Davis or Joan Crawford, those old-time gals—they just sort of talked sweet and smiled a little, and then the scene changed and, they were gone. It wasn't like this at all. There wasn't any talk about the sunrise or oceans or things that happened before he was even born, for Christ's sake.

Mitzi must have sensed his discomfort, because she laughed again, sounding almost like the old Mitzi, the one without the sickness, the one who could stomp up and down the runway and send the marks into a frenzy while all she was thinking about was the pile of nylons back in her trailer that wanted washing. "Here I am dying," she said, "and all I got to say goodbye to is some young drifter who can't even remember to get a girl a lemon ice when she wants one so bad and asks him so nice."

"Dammit, Mitzi, I told you I meant to get your old ice, but what happened, see, was Mr. Pratling, he sent Bronco after me and I had to Bozo and then I got dizzy and I—"

"You were the only one who came when I called all last week," Mitzi interrupted. "The only one who came even

when you knew what was—you know—happening. Oh, Mr. Pratling was considerate enough. He didn't turn me out or anything. But it was you who kept coming to see me just as if there wasn't anything wrong. Pete, maybe you caught it from me—the sickness. It's real contagious, they say." She paused, drew a breath, and made a sound that might have been a chuckle. "Drifter, I've seen dozens of you—hundreds when you calculate all the years I been around. When I first spotted you out on the lot, I figured you were just like all the rest—thinking about nothing but feeding your belly and pleasuring your balls. Well, you sure surprised me, drifter. You sure as hell did."

"Mitzi, you crying again? If you are—if you don't cut that crap, I'm getting out of here, I swear!"

"Pete, there's something you got to learn. You just let a woman cry when she has a mind to. Women like to cry. The trouble with women—you can take it from me, hon—is they know too damn much, and it makes 'em cry a lot. Oh, I don't mean they know things in their head. It's not college-knowing I'm talking about. I'm talking about *gut*-knowing. It's something in the blood, and I don't think it's got anything at all to do with the brain. So when a woman starts crying, you just remember what Mitzi told you, and you just let her holler. She'll feel better after, and so will you when she starts cozying up to you and saying cute words and touching you and all."

"Just you cut it the hell out, you hear? I swear I never knew you to cry before. You were always a fighter, Mitzi. Up on the runway or down on the lot—wherever. You fought back when somebody'd try to put you down or like that."

"You're right, drifter. Just an old warhorse, that was me. But even old warhorses got a right to get out to pasture when all their battles are over and done with. Now, don't you agree with me?"

"Aw, shit, I don't know what you're talking about, you and your warhorses and sunsets."

"Sunrises!"

"Well, whatever."

The anger boiling within Pete had something to do with

Mitzi, he knew that much. What he didn't know, and what fed his anger, was what else it had to do with. Because he wasn't mad at Mitzi. Or was he? Well, maybe he was a little. He tried to think of other things, but his life didn't have all that many exciting events that he could fasten his attention on or that could hold his interest for very long. He was mad at something more than Mitzi, something that could make a man find a sour taste in his mouth right in the middle of his laughing at a dirty joke in a barroom where the TV set was on and some baseball team had two men out and the bases loaded.

"Cat got your tongue, hon?"

"Nope. I was just thinking."

"Me, too. I've been thinking a whole lot, lying here. I heard on my transistor, before the batteries went kerflooey, that they even got the sickness over in China. I heard it's all over everywhere. I was thinking there sure is going to be a traffic jam up there at those pearly gates."

"Down below, too." Pete gave Mitzi a grin before he remembered that the lights were out and she couldn't see him.

"It's a punishment, if you ask me."

"For what?" he asked, surprised at her remark. "A punishment for what?"

"Oh, all kinds of things, I guess. Like wars. And murders, For screwing your neighbor before he gets a chance to screw you. I bet that's exactly what it is. They won't ever find a cure. If they did, the punishment wouldn't work. Pete, do you think they'll ever find a cure?"

He started to shake his head, stopped. "Sure, they will. They cured TB, didn't they? They cured polio and all kinds of diseases. Those scientists can figure out anything, you give 'em enough time."

"They sure would have to be awful fast workers to do me any good, and that's a fact."

Pete snorted, trying to sound skeptical.

"Now don't you start hollering at me again. You got no right. You're as healthy as a hunting hound. I know what's eating you, drifter. What's eating you is the plain fact that you know you can't kid me into thinking I'm going to pull

through. That makes you feel embarrassed like you did something wrong. Only you haven't. So you just go on and sit there if you want to and wait with me. You could tell me about what you're going to do tomorrow. Hey, that's a real good idea. You just sit there and tell me all about tomorrow, Pete. That way I won't—What are you going to do tomorrow, honey?"

Pete told her that, well, he wasn't too sure. He thought he would just travel on maybe, see a few more towns before he settled down and—

"You? Settle down? Now that's a laugh. You couldn't settle down if they tied you to a tree. You'd find a way to untie the knots and off you'd be. Now don't get me wrong. I'm not criticizing you or anything like that. It's just that I know your type. Your type roosts in a place for a week or two—a month, maybe. The town looks pretty good at first, but then you start getting ants in your pants, and you just got to move on. Down the next highway into the next town—but it isn't there, take it from me."

"What isn't there?"

"Whatever it is you're looking for. The thing you lost."

"I ain't lost nothing. Hell, I never had nothing to lose."

"Forget it. I shouldn't have interrupted you. Talk some more about tomorrow."

As Pete told Mitzi that Bronco wanted him to buddy up with him, he began to realize in the talking, that he wasn't choosing his words with care or worrying about whether they were having the right effect on Mitzi or not. Now that was a surprise that almost silenced him. Could it be that Mitzi didn't want anything from him? Or was it that she was past wanting, being as sick as she was?

But she must want something. Everybody did. He sensed her wanting. He could feel it pulsing in the dark between them. It occurred to him that she wanted two things. She wanted tomorrow, and she wanted to be with somebody—now. Well, no problem. Tomorrow wasn't his or anybody else's, for that matter—not for sure anyway—so if he told her about how he imagined it might turn out to be, so what? If he stayed with her until—well, he had

no appointment anywhere. No one was waiting for him anywhere with one anxious eye on the clock, so he had nothing to lose. Besides, Mitzi's wanting wasn't the same as the wanting of all the others. Mitzi and he were friends, and that made the whole thing different.

Later, when the lean possibilities of Pete's imaginary tomorrow were all but exhausted, Mitzi asked him if he would like to hear about what she was planning to do tomorrow.

Before he could answer, she said, "I'm going to get up on that runway in my G-string and pasties, and when all the hooting and hollering starts, I'm going to hold up both my hands until all those horny bastards shut up, and then I'm going to make my announcement. 'Gentlemen,' I'm going to say, 'due to a very important previous engagement, I will not be able to entertain you today. But before I go, I want to tell you all something you just may not know. One month ago I was thirty-four years old. Now I know lots of people are thirty-four years old. But what I'm getting at is that in my particular profession, being thirty-four years old is like having a club foot, you know? If Gus up there in the back would put in a white spotlight instead of that red one he's got on me, why, you'd see what I'm talking about. I used to perform in a white light as bright as any old harvest moon. But that was yesterday and today's today, and you boys have been fooled long enough in my opinion. It's about time you stopped peeking at Granny's pussy and found something constructive to occupy your minds.'

"That's what I'd say, and then I'd blow them all a kiss and walk off that stage, and the marks would yell to me to please come on back, but I wouldn't."

"You couldn't ever do it," Pete declared firmly. "You'd curl up and—you wouldn't know what to do with yourself if you didn't have a chance to strip anymore. You'd—"

"I'd settle down and get married to somebody. Maybe some nice insurance salesman and—"

"You? Married?" Mitzi's sudden silence made Pete realize that now was not the time for truth, not even between friends. After all, he quickly reminded himself, this was

Mitzi's tomorrow they were talking about, and he might as well let her have it her way. "You and that insurance salesman—how many kids you figuring on having? Two's a nice number. One boy and one girl—how about that for starters?"

"We'd live—" Mitizi's voice was lower "—in a small town where they still have firecrackers and drum majorettes marching down Main Street on the Fourth of July. I'd cook spaghetti every Saturday night, and my man would complain that he didn't like spaghetti, and I'd tell him that spaghetti was economical, and besides it was good for him."

Mitizi's dream of tomorrow slowly unraveled in the darkness that lay between her and Pete, and after a few minutes Pete could actually see the house she was going to live in with her insurance salesman. It was painted plain white, and there were geraniums planted by the front porch. He saw Mitzi's boy and girl getting on the school bus every morning. He heard the birds singing in the maple tree that grew in the middle of the front yard. He was standing by the lilac bushes beside the kitchen window, watching Mitzi in her apron and oxfords at the stove, when he realized something had gone wrong with her dream.

"Mitzi?"

How long had it been since her voice had crept up from the bed?

"Mitzi, I bet your little boy grew up to be just like his daddy," he prompted.

Her response was a dry gasp. Her hand fluttered about the sheets and found Pete's and held on to it. The sharpness of her hardened flesh grazed the skin of his own hand, but he did not withdraw it. He wanted to switch on the light. He needed to. He didn't want to be here in the dark, not now, not now.

"Hundreds—of you," she whispered. "I've seen them all. Pete? You still there? *Pete!*"

"No need to take on so. I'm here. I'm not going no place."

"The light—put it on. It's so dark in here!"

He had to jerk his hand free of Mitzi's before he could

get up. It took him some minutes to find the light switch, and when he flicked it and turned, the dead thing in the bed wasn't Mitzi anymore. Its eyes were open, but there was an emptiness in them. Its lips were parted, and a small froth of saliva hovered at their corners. But the terrible thing, the awful thing that made the body in the bed a stranger, was the crystalline coating that glazed it.

Pete had never before seen someone when the sickness had had its way with them. He had seen the people in the streets, screaming in their delirium in the early stages of the sickness. He'd heard someone say that they ended up like mummies, embalmed in glass. This must be what that forgotten someone had meant. The body on the bed glittered in the light. The sickness had passed through its several ugly stages and left in its wake a crimson bauble that had once been a human being.

If Pete were not so frightened, he might have thought the wreck on the bed was beautiful, which it was in an unnatural way. But he was still afraid of what had just happened to Mitzi in the dark and what he now saw made him more so. He backed toward the open door of the trailer and was about to flee from the pursuer who had snared Mitzi but through some odd twist of fate or fortune had missed him this time. Then he realized that there must be something he should say. But what? Couldn't he just leave? She was dead, wasn't she? She wasn't going to hear anything he said anyhow. But walk away—just walk away without a final word to an old friend?

"The marks are sure going to miss you, Mitzi," he whispered. He knew that it wasn't the truth. But it was as close as he could come to whatever the right words really were.

He turned out the light and closed the door of the trailer behind him and stood for a moment in the darkness—no, not the darkness. A new day was splaying its gray fingers above the midway banners. As he stood there, Pete saw the first faint traces of gold seep into the sky. Seconds later the gold became bronze. He turned back to the trailer and then, feeling foolish, turned again and walked slowly across the back lot.

He stopped at Mr. Pratling's trailer and told him about

Mitzi. "I guess you ought to notify somebody," he said to the sleepy Mr. Pratling, who grunted and agreed that, yes, somebody should be notified about Mitzi. Pete left and walked across the lot to his own trailer.

"Bronco!" he exclaimed with pleasure as he entered it and found the huge man bent over a suitcase lying open on the floor. "I thought you'd be gone by now. I figured you'd probably changed your mind about us working the key game together after I passed out last night in the Bozo booth."

Bronco straightened. His eyes widened, and his lips drew back over his teeth. His hands rose and quivered nervously in front of him. "Get away from me! You got the sickness. I *seen!*"

"No," Pete said quickly. "I'm okay, honest. I must have got a twenty-four-hour virus or something. But it wasn't that Virus Y." He took a step toward Bronco, who moved backward at his approach. "Why, I'd be dead if it was *that* sickness!"

"That's the truth," Bronco admitted. "You sure you feel okay? You got no hallucinations or nothing like that?"

"Nope. I feel fine."

"Last night, over at Sol's booth, you was having hallucinations. Sol said you thought one of the marks was Death hisself."

"Can't say as I remember about that. I did feel pretty dizzy there for a while."

"You had hallucinations just like the ones people get when they catch that Virus Y."

"Aw, now, Bronco. It just couldn't've been that. You know nobody gets over Virus Y. Take a look at me. Don't I look fit enough to go fifteen rounds with a feisty gorilla?"

Bronco relaxed slightly and began to stroke his chin with one thick hand. "You do look pretty healthy."

"Come on. I'll go a three-minute round with you." Pete crouched in a clumsy boxer's stance, fists at chest level, feet prancing back and forth in front of Bronco. He swung a playful fist forward and struck Bronco's arm a light blow. "Think you can take me, huh? Come on and try it!"

"Cut it out, will you?" Bronco turned aside and continued packing. "Who you been shacking up with all night?"

Pete had collapsed on his cot against the wall. "With Mitzi. Not shacking up though. I just stayed with her until she died."

"You *dummy!*" Bronco bellowed, swinging around to face Pete. "You stayed with her until she died! Don't you have no sense at all? Don't you know the sickness is contagious? I told you she could infect you!"

"Well, it looks like she didn't, don't it?"

"If that don't beat all," Bronco muttered, stroking his chin again.

Pete said, "I guess maybe I'm immune or something."

"Maybe you are at that. Because the way you been hanging around Mitzi all week—if you could've caught it, you would've. Maybe you just got a mild dose, and it didn't take for some reason."

Bronco was watching Pete as if he were seeing someone very special, someone he had never seen before but someone he'd always wanted to meet. The look on his face was the look of a man who has just been told that he had won the Irish Sweepstakes and isn't yet able to believe in his good luck.

"Are we leaving now?" Pete asked.

"I told you, didn't I? I told you we could team up together and work the key game, didn't I? What's the matter with you? What are you looking at me like that for?"

"Some buddy you turned out to be. That there's my suitcase you're stuffing all your clothes into."

"Yeah, I know, but—"

"You were going to steal my suitcase because you thought I had caught the sickness. Hand it over."

Bronco groaned and slammed the palm of one hand against his forehead. "Okay, so I was gonna take it. I thought you was dead—dying, anyway. So what would you want me to do? Leave your lousy suitcase lying around here for the rats or something? Does that make any sense? Or does it make sense that a guy's buddy would be entitled under the circumstances?"

Pete frowned thoughtfully. "Okay, okay. I guess maybe you're right. If I was really dead like you thought, that suitcase sure wouldn't do me no bit of good. It ain't near big enough for a coffin, and that's a fact." He grinned at Bronco.

Bronco picked up the suitcase and dumped his clothes on the cot. "Here. Take your damn suitcase." He flung it at Pete. "I got me my own around here somewhere."

Pete got up and found a faded pair of Levis under his cot. After some more diligent searching he found a clean pair of jockey shorts and a T-shirt and began to dress.

"Ain't you ready yet?" Bronco barked impatiently some time later.

"Yeah, I'm ready." Pete followed Bronco out of the trailer and walked along beside him, his suitcase bumping against his right leg. "Where we heading for, Bronco? You got something in mind?"

"Yeah," Bronco replied, "I got something in mind."

Pete asked him what exactly it was that he had in mind. Bronco told Pete that if there was anything he hated it was a guy who asked a whole lot of fool questions. Didn't Pete trust him? Pete said sure he did. Sure thing. He walked whistling along beside his friend, ready, he believed, for anything and glad that he wasn't traveling alone anymore.

Traveling alone had its advantages, of course, and Pete was fully aware of them. A guy traveling alone could go at his own chosen speed and in any direction he liked. But a guy traveling alone could turn sour too easy with nobody to talk to most of the time and nobody to care whether he kept up or fell behind. Thinking thus, Pete remembered Mitzi. Not the Mitzi he had last seen in the bed but the earlier one in the dark—the invisible one he nevertheless felt he had seen as clear as spring water.

He looked up at the blue sky, saw the sun, and pointed to it. "Hey, Bronco, take a gander at that!"

"At what?"

"The sun, man, the *sun!* I bet it's a long time since you saw that old sun rise!"

Bronco muttered something incomprehensible and

walked on. Pete hurried to catch up with him, wondering why the hell he felt so sad all of a sudden.

The double room they rented in the New York City hotel had slime green walls and a radio that didn't work.

Pete turned on the water in the sink and announced gleefully to Bronco that there really was hot water, which was more than he could say for a lot of hotels he'd been in in his time. Bronco, standing at the window and looking down into the dirty street, merely grunted.

A moment later he turned to Pete and asked, "You still feeling okay?"

"I wish you wouldn't keep asking me that," Pete replied. "You sound like you expect me to keel over any minute."

"It's just that I—aw, go to hell! A guy expresses a genuine interest in a buddy, and what does that buddy do? I'll tell you what he does. He tells his buddy to mind his own business, that's what he does!"

"I didn't mean nothing like that," Pete protested. "But I'm fine. I told you. I must have told you a dozen times since we started hitchhiking out on the turnpike. I appreciate you asking and all, but not so often."

"I don't want to fight with you."

"Who's fighting? Who the hell, may I ask, is fighting?" Pete paused and then, "I'm going to take me a good hot bath." When Bronco didn't respond, he grabbed the bar of soap from the sink, slung a towel over his shoulder, and went out of the room and down the hall to the bathroom that was shared by all the tenants on the floor.

When he returned some time later, a towel tied around his waist, Bronco was sitting on the bed with the telephone receiver in his hand. Pete slammed the door shut behind him.

"What's the matter with you?" Bronco asked. "You look like you seen a ghost."

"No ghost. Cockroaches! This shithouse is crawling with them! I know this ain't no Waldorf-Astoria, but I sure never expected to see so many roaches in one place at

the same time. They must have been having themselves a convention in there under the sink."

Pete sat down, staring at Bronco. "You going to call somebody?"

"I just did." Bronco replaced the receiver.

"A broad, I bet. For the key game?"

"Yeah. For the key game. Listen, I got something I got to do. I'll be back later. Now don't you go getting into any trouble while I'm gone. You stay right here. No telling what might happen to you out on the street, the crazy way people's been acting because of the sickness."

"You gonna be gone long?"

"Not long. See you later."

"I'll be here when you get back," Pete said and added with a grin, "if the roaches don't get me first."

Chapter three

Drip, drip, da-drip, drip.

The faucet's wet lament.

Pete, lying on one of the twin beds in the hotel room and staring at the ceiling, pretended to himself that it was the slime green of the walls oozing down to the floor. *Drip, da-drip.* With his hands behind his head he listened to the faucet, to the melting walls, to the woman wailing down the hall—something about what that spic butcher had done to her baby-to-be.

Pete listened to his belly gurgle and thought about pork chops sizzling in hot grease and about apple sauce.

Where the hell was Bronco? He pulled one hand from under his head and learned from his wrist watch that it was ten past seven. The sounds continued, but Pete could not detect the one sound he had been listening for—the thud and shuffle of Bronco's big feet on the linoleum out in the hall.

He wanted something to eat; he would even settle for scrambled eggs—anything, he was so hungry. But if he left the room and Bronco came back while he was gone, why, maybe Bronco would just cut out again, thinking he was out in some café, highlifing it with a bunch of new-found friends. He'd better wait. He rubbed the palm of his hand on his flat stomach, but it didn't help. The muted gurgling went on. He could call room service. Like hell he could. With one dollar and forty-eight cents in his pocket he couldn't even afford the cost of the little bit of shoe leather the waiter would wear out on the trip up from the kitchen.

When Bronco came back, Pete promised himself, they'd go out and get two great big T-bones and french fries with

lots of ketchup all over . . . He tried to think about something other than his hunger. He thought about sex. That was worse. He hadn't gotten laid since that smartass kid had ducked around onto the back lot a month ago and told him she'd do it for free because she was so crazy about showpeople. *Showpeople!* Carnies weren't really showpeople. Pete thought everybody knew that. He didn't understand the girl at first, but soon understanding didn't matter, because she was fiddling with the zipper on his pants and her breath was hot on his neck and she was asking him where could they go, didn't he have a place they could go, the grass was all wet and she had on her good dress which she'd only worn once before, at her high school graduation.

Thinking now about that cock-happy high school girl, he realized that too many things just happened to him. Some guys, they went out and gave the old world a kick in the ass and sent it spinning and things worked out fine for them. They knew what they wanted, and they knew how to get it. Things didn't happen to *them; they* made things happen! Like Bronco did. *He* didn't wait for somebody to come along and hand him a living. He went right out and conned the marks, and he made out. The trouble with me, Pete decided, is that I got no gumption. No get-up-and-go. Most people put themselves at the head of the list. Most people think of themselves as Number One. He supposed he thought of himself as maybe Number Eighty-Nine or Ninety. Now that was no way to get ahead, no way at all.

The faucet dripped; the walls oozed. Something scurried across the bare floor. Pete wondered if the roaches had left the bathroom and were invading other occupied territory. He should get up and stomp the little bastards good! But he didn't, because along with the faucet and the other sounds there was now a new one. Bronco's voice! And a woman's too, low and controlled. The broad! The broad for the key game!

Pete jumped up, turned on the light, and splashed cold water on his face. He frowned dramatically at his reflection, getting ready to show the broad a real man.

The door opened, and she walked right in.

When he saw her in the mirror over the sink, his first thought was that Bronco sure did know how to pick 'em. This one didn't look like a hooker at all, except for the bold way she met his eyes in the mirror without turning away or blushing or anything like that. For a moment the fatuous face of the hotshot little high school girl blurred the girl's image, and then, assuming a nonchalant expression, Pete turned to confront Bronco's finger pointing at him.

"That's him," Bronco said to the girl. "Strong as an ox and twice as good-looking!" He roared at his joke, and for a moment his laughter was the only sound in the room.

The girl was staring at Pete curiously. He couldn't quite dig the look she was giving him. It didn't seem to be any kind of come-on or put-down. For a hooker she wasn't bad-looking, he decided. Just soft enough in the tits and hips but not flabby. A few wrinkles in the corners of her eyes but they could just as well have come from laughing as from age. He pegged her as between twenty-five and thirty. Hair the color of a sorrel mare he had admired on a ranch where he had worked. Not brown, not red, but a little bit of both. Eyes? Green.

"Pete Bratton," Bronco boomed, "meet up with Miss Nella Carlisle."

She wore a blue linen suit with white buttons and a fancy white blouse that frilled around her neck. Stockings —a nice shade. Nice legs. Shiny white shoes with fairly high heels. She had one arm crossed in front of her, and a black purse hung from it.

"Hey, Bratton! What's the matter? Didn't you hear me talking to you?"

Not what you could call beautiful exactly.

"Her name's Nella Carlisle."

But he wouldn't kick her out of any bed he happened to be occupying.

"Bratton!"

"Hello, Mr. Bratton. I'm pleased to meet you." Nella glanced at Bronco. "If you don't mind, I'd like to begin with a few preliminary questions."

Bronco flung his arms out, his hands palms upward,

nodded to Nella not to mind him and just go right ahead with her preliminary questions.

"Mr. Bratton, how old are you?"

Pete stared at her. How old was he? Now what the hell?

"Perhaps if we sat down, Mr. Bratton? We might as well make ourselves comfortable."

He watched her as she sat down in the chair and opened her purse. He watched as she took out a notebook and a little gold pen. She looked up at him expectantly.

"How old am I?"

She nodded, her pen poised above the notebook.

Pete glanced at Bronco.

"So tell her how old you are," Bronco said, gesturing impatiently.

"Ma'am, if you don't mind, what difference does it make to you?" Maybe she was some kind of hooker he'd never run into before. Maybe she only screwed guys between the ages of twenty and thirty or something like that. He'd heard that some whores, when they weren't working professionally, had pretty funny tastes when it came to off-duty sex of their own. But that was hard to believe about this Nella Carlisle as she sat there looking so sure of herself.

Nella turned her attention from Pete to Bronco. Two little vertical lines formed between her eyebrows. "You told Dr. Farnsworth that Mr. Bratton knew we planned to interview him."

"Sure, I told him," Bronco said quickly. "Hey, Bratton, remember how I told you about the scientists over at Crisis Control Center and how they wanted to have a look at you on account of how you got Virus Y and didn't die? You remember me telling you all about that, right?"

Pete made an earnest effort to remember. He shook his head slowly.

"He's not ever going to win any prizes for brainpower," Bronco confided to Nella. "What's more, he don't pay attention half the time you talk to him."

Nella Carlisle's expression altered. Pete saw the lines between her eyebrows deepen. She looked as if Bronco had just insulted her.

"I think I understand," she said softly and turned back to Pete. "Mr. Bratton, as this—gentleman has told you, my name is Nella Carlisle. I'm associated with Crisis Control Center at the present time, working under the direction of Dr. James Farnsworth, who is, as you probably know, in charge of the project to assess the nature and scope of the disease which we call Virus Y and which is sweeping the world.

"I work for Dr. Farnsworth as a laboratory technician. When we were informed by your friend here that you had contracted the infection but survived it, Dr. Farnsworth wanted me to come and have a talk with you. If indeed you had the sickness and recovered from it, you are something of a medical miracle. No one has yet survived the disease. I hope you'll answer my questions and cooperate to the best of your ability."

"I'm twenty-six years old."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I'm twenty-six years old."

"Oh, yes. Twenty-six years old." Nella wrote the fact on her pad. "Have you ever had any serious illnesses?"

"No. Just headaches sometimes. Toothaches. Nothing serious."

Nella proceeded to ask Pete for his parents' names, where he had been born, his present address, and then to describe in detail what had happened to him on the carnival lot. "I understand you were working as a clown, is that correct?"

Pete nodded. He didn't like the idea of her looking at him and seeing the clown he had been. He was sure that was what she was seeing with those really great green eyes of hers.

"Tell me how you felt, please. Can you describe your symptoms?"

Pete told her about falling from the Bozo tank. He told her he had felt light-headed, sort of dizzy. She jotted something down in her notebook and then began tapping the end of the pen against her even white teeth. He told her he thought he had seen Death outside the booth with a cigar stuck between his lips; it had seemed to him that

Death intended to hit him and not the bull's-eye with those three balls in his big white hands.

"You hallucinated."

"The light in the booth wasn't too good."

"I don't suppose you know whether or not your pulse was irregular during this attack?"

Pete shook his head.

"Any fever?"

"I felt pretty hot, yeah."

"Had you had any contact with infected persons preceding your attack?"

"Mitzi."

"She—Mitzi—had Virus Y?"

"In spades," Bronco volunteered. "She was strapped to her bed for most of a week."

"Mr. Bratton—"

"Listen," Pete interrupted, "I told Bronco I probably had some kind of virus, sure—but not that Virus Y you people are checking up on."

"How do you know it wasn't Virus Y, Mr. Bratton?"

"Well—" Pete hesitated, looked down at the floor, and was sorry to see he had forgotten to put on his boots. He looked up and grinned. "Well, I wouldn't be here today if I had Virus Y, would I? I'd be dead or pretty close to it long about now. You practically said so yourself."

Nella sat forward in her chair. "Mr. Bratton, we are working very hard—scores of people at Crisis Control Center alone and thousands more throughout the world—in an attempt to determine the cause of this disease. If we don't find the cause, we have practically no hope of finding a cure. I am not in a position at this point to contradict your claim that the sickness you experienced was something other than Virus Y. It may very well have been something else. The fact that you are alive does seem to support your conclusion, I admit. On the other hand, we cannot afford to overlook any possibility—any eventuality—that might offer us an opportunity to find a cure before—" Nella left her sentence unfinished. "I wonder," she continued after a moment, "if you would consent to

visit the Center and let members of our staff examine you?"

"You mean to find out if I've got it?"

"No, to find out if you had it. Obviously, you manifest no symptoms of the disease now. At least, not outwardly."

"Bronco, I can't—"

Bronco stepped forward and took Pete's arm. "Sure, you can. They'll take a little bit of your blood, look down your throat, make you say *aahhh.*"

"The examination won't take long. Less than a day, I'd say. Isn't that what you'd say, Miss Carlisle?"

Nella lowered her eyes. "It's difficult to predict. Dr. Farnsworth might want to— I honestly couldn't say at this point exactly how long the examination would take."

"Pete," Bronco said, "look at it this way. There's little kids got this sickness. You've seen 'em screaming and throwing convulsions in the middle of the street, their poor little bodies bent into all kinds of awful shapes. If you could help the Doc find a cure and save those kids, why, I can't think of anything more important than that. No sir, I sure can't. So whattya say?"

"Miss Carlisle," Pete said with apparent reluctance, "I guess I owe it to you—I mean, to those kids, like Bronco said. I guess I can spare the time, considering."

"Very good, Mr. Bratton. Dr. Farnsworth will be most grateful for your cooperation. He instructed me to bring you to the Center tonight so that he and Dr. Sikorsky can begin testing immediately."

"Now?"

"It's very important, Mr. Bratton. It's important to millions of people all over the world."

"I was figuring on me and Bronco going out and having us a coupla T-bones. I ain't eaten a thing since this morning."

Nella deposited her notebook and pen in her purse and stood up. "I'll phone the Center and have them prepare a steak for you. How do you like it? Medium?"

"Just lassoed and laid flat on the plate, ma'am."

Nella smiled and picked up the phone.

Pete finally managed to free himself of her smile. As she began to speak to someone at Crisis Control Center, he edged closer to where Bronco was standing. "It was her you were calling before, wasn't it?"

"Not her exactly. Where she works, I called."

"Why? Why'd you call up? What's in it for you?"

Bronco's eyes widened. "They been asking for help for a long time. When you didn't get the sickness after hanging around Mitzi—hell, I figured it was my duty."

"Fuck you and your duty! I know you well enough to know you don't do nothing for nothing!"

"It's all arranged, Mr. Bratton," Nella said, putting down the phone. "Shall we go now?"

Pete looked from her to Bronco. He was about to tell both of them to get themselves another boy, but he hesitated a moment too long.

"We need you, Mr. Bratton," Nella said softly.

"Think about all those kids in convulsions, Bratton," Bronco said in a grotesquely mournful voice.

"Aw, go to hell!" Pete said and grabbed his jacket, heading for the door.

"Mr. Bratton!"

"Yeah?"

Nella pointed to his feet.

Pete felt himself flushing as he made his way back to where his boots stuck out from beneath the bed. As he left with Nella a few minutes later, he refused to reply when Bronco told him good-bye.

Pete stabbed the flesh on his plate with his fork and began to cut a huge piece from it. He was surprised to find that he didn't have to saw or rip through it. The tender meat sliced easily, blood escaping from it onto the plate. No ketchup had been served with the steak, and Pete liked ketchup almost as much as the meat he smothered with it. He had considered asking for some but had decided not to because he figured the doctors must not have wanted him to have any. Otherwise, they would have given him some, wouldn't they have? He put a large piece of meat in his mouth and began to chew. He placed his

fists, which enfolded his knife and fork, contentedly on the table in front of him.

"Is it satisfactory, Mr. Bratton?"

"Mmmmfff," he said and rolled his eyes in exaggerated ecstasy at Nella Carlisle, who was sitting opposite him in the clean white room. He swallowed. "Not a sliver of bone anywheres in it as far as I can see. First time I ever ate a steak that had no bone a'tall."

"It's a shell steak," Nella volunteered. "They're boneless."

"Mmmmfff."

Nella opened her purse and took out a package of cigarettes. Pete watched her as she fumbled about in her purse. She finally found her lighter and clicked it several times. No flame. She looked up in mild exasperation. "I'm out of fluid, I guess. Or else it's the flint."

When it finally occurred to Pete that she was waiting for him to do something, he dropped his knife and fork, pushed back his chair and searched through his Levis. He found a wooden match which he promptly scratched with his thumbnail. He held out the flame to Nella.

She leaned toward him, the cigarette between two fingers, inhaled, and nodded her thanks. "I'll bet you were a Boy Scout."

"Beg pardon, ma'am?"

"Their motto. You know—'Be prepared.' "

"You mean about the match. No, it was just luck I had it on me. I wasn't ever a Boy Scout. Never even joined the YMCA when I was a kid. Too busy, I guess."

"Doing what?"

"Oh, the usual kid stuff. I used to hike up in the hills on weekends. I went swimming in a lake near where we lived near Albuquerque. School. You know."

"Would you like some ketchup?"

Now wasn't that something, Pete thought. He swallowed the last piece of his steak and shook his head. *Now* she offered him ketchup when the last of the steer was galloping down his gullet. An absent-minded lady scientist, he decided. There was certainly something funny about her. She kept looking at him kind of sideways. She looked

at him as if he were sitting just a little bit to the left or the right of where he actually was. Was she afraid for some reason to look him right in the eye? Maybe she thought he was going to try to screw her or something. He wouldn't mind, but business was business, and besides, he had to get this testing stuff over with so he could really begin to live. But he did wish she would look right at him at least

"You want this here piece of pie?" he asked her. "I never cared much for pineapple pie myself."

"No, thank you. I'm not hungry."

Well, he thought, something's giving you the itch. Or else you wouldn't be so fidgety. "This is sure some place you people got here." He looked admiringly around the white room that seemed never to have heard of dirt. "It's just about the cleanest place I've ever been in in my whole life."

"Dr. Farnsworth is very particular about cleanliness. We follow strict sterilization procedures here at the Center. It significantly reduces the risk of infection. Would you like something else? More coffee?"

Pete pushed his chair back and patted his stomach. "No more room." As he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, Nella's eyes flicked down upon his unused napkin, and he pretended to be yawning.

"Is this place a regular hospital?" he asked her.

"No. It's a research center. It was originally a private foundation doing work on the possible correlation between airborne viruses and certain forms of cancer."

"Oh."

"Doctor Farnsworth and I—our small research unit was part of the staff here. But when Virus Y suddenly manifested itself, we were—well, requisitioned, I suppose you could say—by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare to investigate the cause of the disease. You see, if we can once determine the cause, we can then hope to develop a cure. We are currently being funded by the government. Before Virus Y we were supported strictly by private donations. Since almost all of the federal money for medical research had been reallocated years ago, we

were dependent upon private philanthropy. But that's all changed now. The government has taken a renewed interest in medical research since Virus Y appeared."

"You think you'll find out what causes it?"

"We hope so. It's obviously terribly important that we do find out. That's why Dr. Farnsworth was so excited when he received the telephone call from your friend. No one has ever encountered a case of immunity before."

"I hope I don't turn out to have had something like a summer cold."

"We'll see, Mr. Bratton. It may have been only a cold. Or it may have been that you actually did contract the disease from—what was the woman's name you mentioned? Mimi?"

"Mitzi. She was a stripper in the girlie show."

"I see."

"Yeah. A pretty good one, too. I seen her act a coupla times. She had this stick with two red balloons tied on top of it, and she used to balance it on her— I mean, she'd bend over backward, and the emcee would stand the stick up on her—"

"I'm sure she was very good."

"Well, she wasn't really so hot when you come right down to it. She was getting old, you know? Girls that strip, they got maybe ten good years, and Mitzi had been at it a lot longer than that. She wouldn't quit though. She was a tough old broad."

"Had you worked with the carnival very long, Mr. Bratton?"

"Two months only. Before that I had a job in Detroit for a while. I'd gotten the notion that it might be fun to build cars. Make something useful, you know? But I didn't really get to build any. All I did was put bolts on bumpers. I can't hardly bear to look at a car bumper anymore. I guess I seen my fill of 'em on that assembly line."

"And before that?"

"Let's see. Before that I worked on a ranch in Colorado. Now that I liked a lot. There were horses there and cows, and you could see the stars real close at night. There

was this sorrel mare they gave me to ride when I took the job. A reddish-brown color she was. I called her Bella."

"Bella."

"It's a nice name, right? It's Eyetalian. It means beautiful. Now that mare and me, we would ride over those acres and acres of land where there weren't no people, and we would stay out sometimes until long after dark on my day off, just sort of sharing the sky and the stars, you could say, I guess. Then when we'd get back to the stable —that stable was more like a palace than just a place for horses—I'd rub her down and put feed out for her and, well, it was a real nice time, working out there on that ranch."

Nella was looking directly at Pete for the first time. "Why didn't you stay there with Bella and the stars?"

Pete looked down at the table and at his hands resting on it. "I can't exactly say why. Maybe I should have. It was nice there, no doubt about it. But something gets into me. I get to a place, and I stay for a while, and then it starts to seem that I picked the wrong place again because whatever I expected it to be, well, it turns out it isn't after all. It's hard to explain. I keep expecting to land someplace where I belong, only so far none of the places I've ever landed has been the one. But you wouldn't know about that, having a steady job and all. A profession, I mean. It's different for me."

When Nella spoke, her voice was low, as if lost in the smoke of her cigarette. "We all have a special place, Mr. Bratton. Some of us find it, and some of us never do. Those of us who don't find it have no choice but to continue looking. Some of us keep looking all our lives and we never find it. But the really sad thing is finding that place and then not being allowed to stay there."

"I can see where that would be sad, all right. Worse even than never actually finding the place a person is meant to be. Yeah, I can see that."

The door suddenly swung open, and Pete and Nella looked up at the tall man in the long white coat who had entered the room.

"You're Mr. Bratton, I take it?" the man inquired pleasantly. "Let me say at once, Mr. Bratton, that I hope this turns out to be the right place for you this time. I'm Dr. James Farnsworth, and I'm very pleased to meet you."

Pete got up from the table. "Pleased to make your acquaintance, Doc," he said and shook hands.

Now what had he done wrong? He knew he must have done something wrong, because the words were no sooner out of his mouth than Dr. Farnsworth was frowning and withdrawing his hand. Pete glanced covertly at Nella for some clue as to what had gone wrong.

"Good evening, Doctor," she said, giving a slight emphasis to the last word, making it sound significant, almost mysterious.

So that's the way the land lies, Pete thought. *Doctor.* Not Doc. Dr. Farnsworth.

"Nice place you got here, Doctor," he commented.

"It's adequate, but we could use a bit more money."

"Couldn't we all?" Pete responded, remembering the one dollar and forty-eight cents he had in his pocket. He was impressed with Farnsworth. Big men always impressed him, and Farnsworth certainly was big—big in the shoulders, hands like boulders but with a certain grace to their movements, and big-eyed, too. His large eyes were brown and brilliant, a shade darker than his hair. Women would like those eyes of his, Pete decided. They kind of caressed you. He realized that he had been expecting an old guy with white hair and glasses down on the end of his nose. But this Farnsworth was young and could have passed for a football player, except for the white coat and the real elegant edge he gave to every word he spoke.

"It was very good of you to come to us, Mr. Bratton. God knows, we need all the help we can get."

"Everybody calls me Pete, Doc—Doctor."

"Pete it shall be then. Now about the tests. I think it would be a good idea to begin right away. You'll stay here at CCC during the sequence, of course. We'll put you up in one of our isolation rooms for the time being, until the testing is completed. We wouldn't want you coming down

with a case of Virus Y before we've had a chance to check you out, now would we? Nella, have you made arrangements for Pete? He'll need a sterile gown and—"

"I'm supposed to stay here all night?" Pete interrupted.

"Didn't Nella explain our plans to you?" Farnsworth glanced across the room. "Nella?"

"I haven't gone into the details of the testing yet nor have I explained about our schedule. I was just about to do so when you arrived, Doctor."

"Good enough. I'll be back in a few minutes. Doctor Sikorsky wants to see me—something about a new virus strain he thinks he's isolated. Please see to matters, Nella."

When the door swung shut behind Farnsworth, Nella put out her cigarette. "First, you'll have a blood test. Then a urinalysis and a—"

"I didn't plan on staying all night," Pete said.

"Dr. Farnsworth wants to examine you very thoroughly. In addition, we'll need time to check the test results and observe you under various controlled conditions." Her voice slipped away into silence.

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Of course, Mr. Bratton."

"How come you don't look straight at me?"

"I'm afraid I don't understand what you mean."

"Yes, you do. You understand exactly what I mean. You keep looking off to one side of me, as if you're afraid to look me right in the eye. Why is that?"

"Mr. Bratton, you're mistaken."

"Not to change the subject or anything but call me Pete. When you keep calling me Mr. Bratton, I get the feeling you're talking to somebody besides me. First names are a lot more friendly anyway. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Hey, you looked right at my face that time." When Nella suddenly turned her head, Pete asked, "What are these controlled conditions you were talking about before? They sound kind of spooky to me."

"Not at all. I was referring to the sterilization procedures, the temporary isolation, the exposure to—"

"Yeah, go on. The exposure to what?"

"Dr. Farnsworth will explain in detail what he has in mind. I only assist him. I don't design the program or the direction it takes."

Pete decided to let the matter drop for the moment. He sat down again as Nella began to search for another cigarette. "You forgot," he said.

"Forgot?"

"Your lighter is busted, and I only had that one match on me."

"It's just as well. I smoke too much anyway." She replaced the package of cigarettes in her purse and headed for the door. "If you'll come with me, I'll take you to your quarters. You'll find them quite comfortable."

"At least there won't be any roaches, not around here, I don't imagine."

"No roaches."

They left the room and walked down a gleaming tiled corridor.

"They're all," Pete continued, "back in that hotel Bronco and I was staying at. Every roach in New York City must've checked in there. It was sure some lousy hotel."

As he walked along beside Nella, something about the way he was talking to her—about the odd way he found himself thinking—struck him. He was talking about Bronco and the hotel as if they belonged to some rapidly disappearing past. Things had a habit of happening so fast, he thought. One minute you were here and the next minute you were there. From the carnival to the hotel to here. All in the space of a day. Some guys, he knew, might find such action exciting. He didn't. In fact, he found it vaguely disquieting. It wasn't because he didn't like things to *move*. He did. But take Nella, for example. Take the way she acted around him. Not shy or nervous exactly. But—uncomfortable. Yes, that was it. She acted uncomfortable around him. And Farnsworth he acted like he owned—

"This is one of our isolation rooms, Pete," Nella said. "For the next several days you'll have your meals served here. Dr. Farnsworth and Dr. Sikorsky will conduct their tests here also."

Pete followed Nella into the room. It contained a bed,

two chairs, and a television set. Another door, Pete discovered, led to a small bathroom. "What's that whooshing noise?" he asked, puzzled.

"That's caused by the ventilation system in the room," she replied. "The air in this room is completely replaced every hour. Fresh air is filtered in through those vents up there as the contaminated air is drawn out. It's a continuous and automatic process."

"There's no telephone."

"Was there someone you wanted to call?"

Pete nodded.

"There is a public phone in the hall." Nella stepped aside to let Pete pass her.

But before he reached the door, Dr. Farnsworth appeared. As he came into the room, he put his arm around Pete's shoulder.

"Nella," he said, "tell Nurse Murough that we're ready for her. I've told Dr. Sikorsky that our case is here. He will take an EKG at seven o'clock tomorrow morning. I want you to alert Sanders—we'll want to do some allergy studies. And have someone put a notice on the door that this room is off-limits until further notice."

"Yes, doctor."

"Where are you going, Pete?" Farnsworth asked. "You'll have to—"

Nella said, "He wants to make a telephone call."

"Oh, I see. Well, make it snappy, will you? I want to get you established in here, and I've got a progress report to present to the Control Committee at—" he glanced at his watch "—in five minutes!"

Pete moved swiftly past Nella toward the door. He had barely stepped out into the hall when he heard Farnsworth speak sharply to Nella. His words caused Pete to halt.

"—and about that Bronco Klinger, Nella. I wrote out a check for fifty dollars for his—services, let's say. The man absolutely refused to reveal the whereabouts of Bratton until I agreed to pay him. See that the figure is posted on the current month's expense sheet, please."

"What shall I mark the entry, Jim? Received from Dr.

James Farnsworth, the grand sum of fifty dollars, representing the bounty on a specimen known as Pete Bratton?"

"Nella, why must you always dramatize everything? That man was a thug. I gave him the money. We have Bratton. Now that is simply that for the moment. You take things far too seriously, Nella."

"Yes, perhaps I do. I certainly took you much too seriously, didn't I, Jim?"

"Dammit, Nella, don't start in on that again. Not now and not here!"

Pete walked on down the hall toward the telephone booth. When he reached it, he pulled the forty-eight cents from his pocket and selected a dime. He looked up the number of the hotel in the phone book and dropped his dime in the slot. He didn't know exactly what he was going to say now. Before he'd overheard the conversation between Nella and Farnsworth, he had had a vague notion of apologizing to Bronco for having walked out on him without even saying goodbye because he had been mad. But now—what? Well, he would tell Bronco that this was the twentieth goddam century and people didn't go around selling people to other people anymore. At least, not in the United States of America they didn't.

The hotel operator told him that Mr. Klinger had checked out. Both Mr. Klinger and Mr. Bratton, her records showed, had left the hotel.

Pete hung up and stood there for a moment, alone with his anger. He could just see Bronco walking out of that lousy lobby. Bronco, that bastard, had two suitcases in his hands, and one of them didn't belong to him. Pete leaned back against the wall of the booth and sighed. So that's what had been in it for Bronco. Fifty damn dollars! Him and all his sad talk about kids throwing convulsions! Pete swore. Would he never learn to stop trusting people too much? Would he never learn to stop trying to get along by swinging loose and easy with people? All a guy ever got for being loose and easy and real open with people, it looked like, was a sharp shaft.

Someone was tapping on the glass of the booth.

"Did you make your call?" Nella inquired as he came out of the booth in response to her tapping.

"Sure, I did," Pete lied as he stepped out of the booth. "I called up Bronco and talked to him. He said it was okay with him if I stayed here tonight. He said he'd wait around for me. Bronco and me, we got big plans, you know. He's got contacts all over town and lots of good ideas."

"I'm sure he has," Nella said. "Now if you'll go on back to your room, Nurse Murough is waiting for you."

Pete touched the tips of his fingers to his forehead in a slight salute and left Nella. He found a middle-aged bear of a woman in his room. When she saw him, she picked up the syringe from the metal tray she had placed on the bedside table and beckoned to him.

He went over to her and rolled up his sleeve when she told him to and watched her swab a section of his exposed arm with wet cotton.

"This won't hurt a bit," she growled at him grimly. "You won't even feel it."

But he did feel it, although he pretended to her that he hadn't. After she had withdrawn the syringe filled with his blood, she placed a tiny adhesive bandage over his invisible wound and left the room.

Pete spent the next several minutes trying to convince himself that he really hadn't felt the needle, that he didn't feel anything at all at the moment, as a matter of straight fact. Not a goddam thing.

Chapter four

As usual, Pete fell asleep that night with no trouble at all, the way young animals do when their biological clocks tell them what their bodies need. He needed sleep, so he simply took it from the blackness of the room around him, curled up and dreamless. But then he awoke suddenly, which was not usual, and his dreams began.

Lying on his side in the darkness with his knees drawn up and his hands fisted beneath his chin, he thought about the sandman. Now who in the world, he wondered, ever invented the sandman? The same person probably who invented the bogeyman. He thought about the millions of kids who had been scared to death by stories about the bogeyman with the big teeth and eyes of fire. Before he'd gotten wise to Inez and to the stories she told to scare him upstairs to bed and out of her way, he himself had actually seen the bogeyman. He had been lurking outside their house near Albuquerque one night—or was it Boise? He couldn't remember for sure, but the location didn't matter. The bogeyman was hiding in the yard. Pete had seen him through his bedroom window. He was hiding among the clothes swaying on the line in the back yard next door. First thing the next morning he told Inez what he had seen, but she merely laughed and said, "Some bogeyman, you bet! You saw old Mr. Handelmeir from the butcher shop. The cops caught him last night stealing ladies undies off the lines."

So there wasn't any bogeyman, only Mr. Handelmeir with his thick mustache and eyes that blinked a lot but sure didn't blaze like the bogeyman's did.

No Santa Claus either. That balloon had burst for Pete

by the time he was eight years old. Some kid whose name he couldn't remember had told him the truth, which he didn't believe until he absolutely had to, which wasn't very long because he had hidden on the stairs late the next Christmas Eve. He watched Inez hanging the balls on the tree and putting out his presents while his daddy drank beer and bitched about having to stay up half the night just to fool some kid and he didn't give a damn if it was only once a year, he was dead on his feet after working all day.

No fairies—at least not the kind Inez had once read to him about from a book she had bought in the supermarket. Fairies didn't put those quarters under your pillow in exchange for a pulled tooth. Your parents did. He always felt he should have figured that one out for himself. After all, what would a fairy *do* with a useless old tooth?

Maybe if he thought about something nice, something good that had happened to him, he'd be able to fall asleep again. There was that time in junior high—Valentine's Day it was—when all the kids put their valentines in a pasteboard box the teacher had covered with red and white crepe paper. When they were distributed, he got one written by hand that said, "I love you. Meet me tonight in front of the drugstore."

Written by hand! That meant it was special for certain. He'd run to the drugstore right after supper and waited. He waited until almost nine o'clock, but the only person who came and hung around for a while was ugly old Eloise Simpson, who wore braces and never smiled. Afterward, he wondered if it had been Eloise who had sent him that valentine. The kids said she was fast. But when he had spoken to her that night, his mind on Jeannie Levere, who had told their teacher that she was going to be Miss America when she grew up, all Eloise said was "Hi." She kept hanging around, waiting for something to happen to her, Pete supposed, just as he was doing.

He turned over and pulled the sheet up to his chin, listening to the sound of the ventilation system. It *whoosshed* loud enough to maybe suck him right up through those vents near the ceiling. The thought amused him. Nurse

Murough would come in tomorrow and find him gone, and she'd run and tell Farnsworth, who would finally figure out what had happened. Pete could just hear the doctor telling a staff meeting somewhere that Pete was the first patient he'd ever lost to airconditioning and he guessed maybe they'd better get an electrician in to adjust the ventilators and prevent any further accidents.

He wondered where Bronco was now. Probably in a bar somewhere, talking big with his big mouth and getting everybody all excited with his lies. Or maybe he was—there were lots of places to go in New York City. There were penthouses with carpets on the floor, with girls you could call up and come over to see so long as you had enough cash. There were restaurants on the tops of tall buildings —he'd seen them in lots of magazines—and you could sit up there on their terraces if it was summer like now and flick the stars off your shoulders as if they were only dandruff flakes. Poor places, too. Slums and ghettos where people pushed dope and talked tough. He didn't ever expect to see any of those places—not the penthouses (where would he ever get that kind of money?) and not the ghettos where somebody would put a knife in your back just because they didn't like your looks. Cities, he decided, were for other people, not him. They were for people who had money and knew how to get more. Why, there wasn't even any place to sit down in most cities without getting rousted. You either had to have a place to go in cities or else you had to have strong legs and just keep on walking.

He turned over on his back. He wondered where Inez was tonight. He'd been planning on calling her long distance for some time now, but he hadn't done it yet. Once he almost did. He even got as far as giving the operator her number, but when he heard the phone start ringing, he'd hung up. What could he say to her? "Hi, it's me, and I just made a million dollars. I'll send you some as soon as I can get to a bank." And what would Inez say to him, just what? "You're in New York City? What for? What are you doing there?" Now what could he answer to those kind of questions? But he would call her up someday. It

suddenly occurred to him that he could call tomorrow, because now he could answer her questions. "What am I doing here? Why, I thought just about everybody knew that. I'm here on a special mission. I had me a case of Virus Y—now, wait! Don't cry because I'm okay, I really am. Anyway, like I was saying, I had it and I got over it and this here Doc—Dr. Farnsworth's his name—well, he called me up on the phone and offered me—he said I was a modern medical miracle—how about that? and I'm going to help them find a cure. Maybe I'll be on television later on to tell everybody all about it."

Why, it was almost true! While he was curled up here in the darkness, tomorrow was coming and, by God, maybe he would be on television someday with important people shaking his hand and thanking him kindly and a call coming in from the White House and lots of telegrams and special delivery letters from mothers whose kids had been sick but were all better now because of him . . .

Soon the dreams crowded the room. In one dark corner Inez talked through a pink telephone to the President about how her son had done what he did for the good of the country, and sure, you bet, she'd dearly love to come on East to the White House and have her picture taken in the Rose Garden . . .

Bronco sat on the edge of the bed and spilled beer on the sheets as he noisily calculated how far a fifty-dollar bonanza he'd collared could travel on the nose of a filly guaranteed to win even though she was a million-to-one shot . . .

Sitting stiffly on two straight chairs were Nella Carlisle and Dr. James Farnsworth, neither speaking, both looking right past him as if he weren't really there . . .

Time passed for Pete, unevenly divided between waking and dreaming, as what was real became unreal and what was unreal seemed almost attainable at times, as no clock ticked and the ventilation system whispered secrets to itself. The world behind Pete's closed eyelids quickly became overpopulated with people he knew, and he was glad he hadn't been elected to referee their ricocheting lives.

In the morning a gnome of a man opened the door and

came into the room. He stared down at the sleeper in the bed for a moment and coughed softly. Then, more loudly. Finally, he rapped on the wall.

"Unnhh!" Pete groaned and sat up, spilling sheets and sleep.

"Good morning," the gnome said. "I'm Dr. Stefan Sikorsky. Pleased to meet you—Pete, isn't it?" Holding out a gnomish hand which disappeared in Pete's, he asked "How are you feeling this morning, young man? You're feeling fine?"

"I'm okay," with a yawn. "You the one's supposed to test me?"

"I am. But you'll be wanting breakfast first, I imagine."

"You got yourself a good imagination, Doc."

Now this one, Pete thought, this Dr. Sikorsky, he looked the way a doctor was supposed to look. He had wrinkles all over his face, and he was old. He had a little bit of gray hair left around the edges of his ears and on the back of his head, but he was mostly bald. His eyebrows were bushy. He looked exactly like a doctor.

But there was something about this doctor that didn't seem right. Pete was pretty sure that this doctor's breath was eighty proof, maybe even a hundred. The white parts of his eyes were red. He wouldn't take a chance on lighting a match around this doctor.

Pete's breakfast was brought by an attendant who kept watching Pete as if he expected him to leap out of his bed at any moment and loudly announce the secret cure for the deadly and dreaded Virus Y. But Pete merely lay there staring at the boiled eggs and oatmeal as if he were an oriental emperor whose food taster had just resigned.

"Eat," said Dr. Sikorsky, gesturing at the tray the attendant had placed astride Pete's legs.

"Eat *this* stuff?"

"It's not haute cuisine, I admit, but it's on our allergy sequence list. We'll be trying out a number of other items on you as the days go by. But I don't know why Jim didn't just ask you first if you were allergic to any particular foods. Did he ask you about that?"

"No," Pete replied, shattering an eggshell with his knife

and letting what was inside ooze out onto his plate. "I can eat most anything and get away with it. I mean, my stomach must be made of stone or something. Hey, you wouldn't happen to have any sausages or bacon or like that, would you?"

"Maybe tomorrow. Tell me, Pete, have you ever had an EKG? An EEG?"

"I can't say for sure because I don't know exactly what those things are."

Dr. Sikorsky explained what they were, and Pete told him that no, he hadn't ever had either one of them. Was he going to have them? Dr. Sikorsky assured him that he was.

"I'm not worried about the one for my heart," Pete commented as he broke pieces of bread into his dish of boiled eggs. "But if you're going to measure my brain waves like you said, you better make sure you got some extra fuses around the place."

"We'll take our chances," Dr. Sikorsky said, returning Pete's grin.

"You a test specialist, Doc?"

"Not exactly, no. I was primarily an internal medicine man. But I—"

"That's a good one! From all I hear, you guys need a medicine man to figure out about this Virus Y. You do rain dances?"

"We haven't had to resort to rain dances as yet, but I'll let you in on a little secret. We may just have to before much longer. We're getting nowhere. Pretty soon we'll have to go out on expeditions to round up all the quacks with their snake oil and fake cancer cures. We might just as well. We're certainly not winning any prizes for curing Virus Y patients."

"It's pretty bad, huh?"

Dr. Sikorsky sat down on the chair beside the bed and folded his hands over his paunch. "It's terrible. You know, a doctor is supposed to understand everything. Now I'd be the first person to admit that we doctors know a lot less than everything, but people *expect* us to know everything. They seem to need to believe we're geniuses. They depend

on us to know all the answers. But in this situation, they might just as well go to their local quack for a cure, since we're not able to help them."

Dr. Sikorsky studied Pete's face. "Maybe you'll be our answer. I certainly hope so. If something doesn't happen soon, this old world of ours is going to be one enormous cemetery. I never liked cemeteries much myself. They strike me as a waste of time and money. It's the living that deserve our attention, not the dead."

"You know something, Doc, that's what I think. I think people ought to put all their funeral money into something worthwhile—maybe into teaching new doctors or something like that. Think of all the colleges you could build with that much money."

"Are you married, Pete?"

"Hell, no. No girl I ever knew would want to link up with a guy like me that's going nowhere in particular. I got no trade."

"What did you do before you came here?"

Pete told Dr. Sikorsky about the Marines, omitting the fact that he had deserted, about the ranch in Colorado, about all the bumpers in the automobile plant in Detroit, and about the carnival.

"So that's about all there is to it," he concluded a few minutes later. "I've been around, seen lots of places, done things."

"What do you expect to do after you're through here, Pete?"

"Nothing special. I'll just take things as they come. I never have been one for making big plans for myself. No, wait, that's not true. Once I did."

"Make plans?"

Pete nodded. "It was when I had this mean old mongrel dog. Nobody could stand that dog except me. Snarled a lot, he did, and he didn't take to people easy. But him and me, we got along okay. He was a private kind of dog, and I used to just let him be, when he wasn't in the mood for company. I guess he appreciated that because when he *was* in the mood, he'd come looking for me with his tail wagging and barking fit to burst. He was part every kind

of dog you could think of just about. Had him a lot of hair that kept getting in his eyes, and he had ears, one of which would stand right up straight while the other one, well, it just went every which way the wind blew. He was cream-colored. I called him King. Well, what I'm trying to get at is, he was hit by a car one day when I was just a kid. Don't know for sure how old I was at the time—ten, maybe. Or eleven. Anyway, that car never even stopped after what it did to King. It broke things up inside him. There was blood coming out of his mouth, and he tried to bite me when I touched him, but I didn't mind. It was because of the pain he was in, you know? Well, pretty soon his eyes got cloudy, and he just laid there in the gutter where the car had knocked him, and he couldn't move even an inch.

"He died, that dog did. Somebody called the cops, but by the time they came—they were planning on shooting King—he was already dead. They said they were going to take him away—to the ASPCA or someplace like that, I guess—but after I talked to them a little they said sure, I could bury him myself out in our backyard, which I did. That's all."

"I'm not quite sure I follow you, Pete," Dr. Sikorsky said. "You mentioned that there was a time when you made plans for yourself."

"I already told you. *That* was the time. When King got killed." Pete noticed the puzzled expression on Doctor Sikorsky's face. "Oh, I forgot to tell about how I thought I'd like to get to be a veterinarian. That was probably the one and only time I made plans, but later on I quit high school, and you need a good education to be a veterinarian."

"I do believe you would have made a good one."

"Well, I might have. I like animals. And I guess it's as good a way as any of making a living. But don't get me wrong. I'm not thinking only about the money I could make."

"I know you're not, Pete."

"That sure was a long time ago. I thought I'd forgotten all about King and that car."

Dr. Sikorsky stood up. "Someone will come for the

tray. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll have the EKG equipment brought in."

"I could come with you to where it's at, if it would save some trouble."

Dr. Sikorsky, at the door, turned. "I'm afraid you're confined here to your quarters for the time being. Once you're declared clean—well, we'll see."

When Sikorsky had gone, Pete slumped back on his pillow. "Why this here's nothing but a high-class jail," he told the ceiling solemnly. "But they got things all wrong, because I didn't commit no crime. I'm innocent." That gave him a good laugh. He'd swiped a pair of Levis from the five-and-dime just before he'd joined the carnival, and he'd done a few other things you couldn't exactly call innocent in his time. So he'd serve his sentence—like the Bird Man of Alcatraz he'd seen in a movie once—making the best of things and helping out science.

He was busy explaining it all to the faceless judge in his mind when Farnsworth entered the room snapping his fingers and calling out to someone unseen behind him in the corridor.

"Hurry it up, will you? I thought you'd have it all completed by now." Farnsworth shook his head in annoyance and stepped briskly into the room.

"Hi, Doctor," Pete greeted him. "How's it going?"

Farnsworth glanced at Pete's tray and said, "Boiled eggs, right? Oatmeal?"

Pete grimaced, nodded, and watched as Farnsworth noted something on the chart attached to the foot of the bed.

"Dr. Sikorsky's going to test my heart—my head, too."

"Mmm-hmm."

"What are you writing on that thing?"

Farnsworth looked up and smiled broadly. "Did you sleep well, Paul?"

"Pete. Pete Bratton."

"I beg your pardon. Pete. How are you feeling?"

"Fine. Same as yesterday. You know, I could save you all a whole lot of trouble."

"Oh?"

"I don't have it. I must be immune to the sickness."

"I certainly hope so, but that remains to be proven." Farnsworth paced back and forth in front of the bed and then went to the door and called to Sikorsky, who appeared almost immediately, pushing the EKG equipment on its wheeled cart.

"It's nearly nine o'clock," Farnsworth observed flatly.

Sikorsky grunted as if the news that it was nearly nine o'clock in no way interested him. He busied himself with the black boxes and the roll of paper. "Do you want me to do this myself or—"

"Nella!" Farnsworth said, flicking the switch on a small intercom set into the wall. "Nella!" he repeated more loudly when she failed to answer immediately.

Her voice, when it came, sounded cool. "Yes, Jim?"

Farnsworth told her he wanted her in Bratton's room right away. She was to bring a nurse with her.

Sikorsky turned to Farnsworth and said, "Why don't you relax, Jim? You're driving yourself—all of us—pretty hard. Nella's beginning to show the strain. I saw her earlier this morning, and she looked whipped."

"Nella's tough."

"Not that tough, Jim. No woman is. Women can take just so much—a lot, perhaps—but then they crack."

"Do I detect a certain Slavic ambiguity in your statements, Stefan? You *are* talking about our heavy schedule here at the Center, aren't you?"

"What else?"

"Nella will be fine. She's not the cracking kind. She's sensible and she's stable. She'll survive."

"I hope so. I just thought I should mention it. I fully understand that you want to find a cure and find it as fast as possible. I suppose an ambitious young man like you can be expected to be somewhat ruthless in his relentless pursuit of fame and fortune."

Farnsworth folded his arms and stood stiffly near the cart where Sikorsky was making adjustments on the equipment. "Stefan, let's not let our personalities or our private lives interfere with the task confronting us. I certainly don't, and I strongly recommend that you don't either.

Please try to keep in mind that I head the staff here and am fortunate in having access to the brightest minds in the nation—in the world, for that matter. Young, vigorous minds with their best work still ahead of them . . ."

"I believe I understand you, Jim. In fact, I'm certain I do."

"Good. It's important—to our work—that you understand."

"Hey, look who's here!" Pete cried.

"Good morning, Jim," Nella said as she came into the room followed by a nurse. "Stefan."

"Where *have* you been, Nella?" Doctor Sikorsky asked. "It's nearly nine o'clock!"

Farnsworth turned swiftly toward Sikorsky, whatever he had been about to say unsaid. Instead of speaking, he gestured angrily at the equipment, and the nurse stepped forward and removed the tray from Pete's bed.

"I'm Pete Bratton," Pete told the nurse.

"Nella," Farnsworth said, "I'll want notes taken. You've brought your notebook?"

Nella pulled a stenographer's notebook from the pocket of her white coat and opened it. As if the gesture were a signal, everyone in the room moved at once.

Farnsworth went to the window and stood with his back to it as Sikorsky began to unwind the wires attached to the machine. The nurse began to apply a colorless salve to Pete's temples and forehead. Nella sat down beside the electroencephalographic equipment and wrote the data at the top of a blank page on her pad.

As Sikorsky fastened the ends of the wires to Pete's head and the long needles began to move across the paper, Pete realized that he felt no different now that the black box was in operation and his brain waves were being recorded on the paper for all to see. He felt vaguely embarrassed, but he didn't know why.

"Well, Stefan?" Farnsworth prompted.

Sikorsky bent over the unwinding sheet of paper and studied the oscillations being recorded there. "Not very strong impulses, Jim."

Farnsworth strode across the room and looked down at a dial where a little needle hovered. "Of course, they're not very strong. Nurse, increase the amplification to one million." He glanced almost contemptuously at Sikorsky. "You really couldn't expect very strong impulses with the low level of amplification you were using."

"Close your eyes, Pete," Farnsworth directed. "The alpha waves," he commented after a moment, "are regular. They vary between nine and eleven per second. Open your eyes, Pete."

The alpha waves promptly disappeared from the unfolding record made by the needles, and Farnsworth carefully noted the voltage and frequency of the beta waves. "Splendid," he commented. "There are no delta waves. It's a healthy brain. No indication of incipient tumor growth or of epilepsy. That should do it, Stefan. Now the EKG. If his heart is as sound as his brain, we should experience no difficulties with the transplants."

"Transplants?" Pete asked. "What transplants?"

Farnsworth waved a hand in an attempt to silence him.

"Hey, wait a minute, I don't want—"

Nella looked up from her notebook but not at Pete. Her eyes were on Farnsworth, obviously waiting to hear what his answer would be.

"Pete, I'll explain everything to you later," Farnsworth said. "We have many other tests to perform before our findings can be considered complete. Then, of course, the tests must be evaluated. Let me assure you that you have nothing at all to worry about. We are, after all, medical men. We have our ethics."

Pete studied Farnsworth's face and found it thick with smiles. His voice a moment ago had been soft, and Pete had sensed a warmth in it that he hadn't noticed before.

When he was disconnected from the machine, only minutes elapsed before another one was wheeled into the room, and he was connected to it.

"Here, let me help you with that," Sikorsky said to the nurse who was taping electrodes against Pete's skin. "Oh, sorry," he murmured as the wires slipped from his faintly trembling fingers.

"She can manage better by herself, Stefan," Farnsworth snapped.

Sikorsky stepped aside.

This time the results of the test were recorded photographically on a small illuminated screen attached to the electrocardiagraph machines. Pete watched the peaks and valleys appear on it, and he wondered what they signified. When Farnsworth told him to get out of bed and jog in place for several seconds, he promptly obeyed. The recording continued, and it must have been okay, Pete decided, because Farnsworth sure did look happy.

"No obstructions," Farnsworth said, and Nella made a note. "Not a single indication of faulty impulse formation. A heart like this one should be able to tolerate just about any kind or degree of stress—within reason, of course. It looks like we won't have any difficulty at all with—"

Pete waited to hear what Farnsworth was going to say, but Farnsworth seemed to have forgotten it, or else he had decided not to pursue his thought any further.

"Stefan," Farnsworth said as he headed for the door, "check his immune system right away. If it shows any abnormalities—even the slightest—call me at once. I'll be in my office. Nella, come with me."

Nella rose and followed Farnsworth from the room, closing the door behind her.

"I guess I passed the tests, huh?"

"Yes, you passed, Pete. You passed with a perfect score. Dr. Farnsworth, as you may have noticed, was quite pleased."

"But, Doc, you don't look glad at all."

"Your heart and brain function normally, Pete. You'll live to be a hundred. Excuse me. I'll be back shortly. We'll continue with our work as soon as I can get the members of the immune unit together."

Pete, left alone in the room after the nurse had wheeled out the electrocardiograph machine, got out of bed and went to the window. Down below in the building's parking lot he saw a woman running. Her arms flailed wildly above her head, and her long hair flew out behind her. As Pete watched, two men came running toward her from op-

posite directions. Both men, he realized, were policemen. They caught her between a Mustang and a Volkswagen. Pete opened the window on impulse and heard the words issuing from the woman's twisted lips as they flew up to strike the sky.

" . . . and the angel of the Lord declared unto me—flaming swords and lillies of the field—I cry—!"

Pete shook his head sadly as the policemen grappled with the raving woman and then dragged her screaming through the parking lot and out of sight beneath the overhang at the building's rear entrance.

It was obvious to Pete that she had the sickness. She was trapped by the delusionary devils and demons that inhabited the minds of the stricken. He had never seen her before in his life and knew he would probably never see her again. He didn't even know her name. But he was sorry she was so sick.

Chapter five

"I've had me an EEG and an EKG and maybe a dozen blood tests all told," Pete told Farnsworth several days later, "I've taken a whole bunch of X-rays and had more oatmeal and boiled eggs than it's fair to make a man eat."

They were sitting on opposite sides of Farnsworth's desk in the doctor's office, which was cluttered with files and furniture.

"So you are proposing that we terminate our experiments, is that it, Pete?" Farnsworth asked with a pleasant smile.

"Look, I don't want to make trouble or anything," Pete said, "but it's been nearly a week since I came here, and I figure it's time I was moving on."

"Moving on where, may I ask?"

Pete waved his hand vaguely. "I got to find me some kind of a job and a place to stay."

"You have a job, Pete. You have a place to stay. You are working for me at the moment, and while you are so employed, the Center is your home."

"Well, I appreciate all that Doctor, but it's not what I had in mind. I mean, I hope I helped you out and all, but I think you fellows must know all about me that there is to know by now."

Farnsworth leaned over his desk and folded his hands in front of him. "We do know a great deal about you, Pete, as a result of our tests to date."

"Have you figured out if I'm really immune?"

"There is a problem in that area. Just as we don't know what causes Virus Y or how to cure it, neither do we know the length of its incubation period in the human body.

Strong evidence suggests that you are immune. The records we've managed to compile since the Center was established indicate that victims of the illness succumb within a day or two following contact with or exposure to an infected person. On the other hand, it is entirely possible that the virus—if indeed it actually is a virus—may lie dormant in certain individuals for a long period of time before any symptoms manifest themselves. It is for that reason that we would be most reluctant to see you leave at this time. However, we have no legal right to detain you here without your consent."

"Then I can go?"

Farnsworth nodded assent and at the same time pressed a button on the intercom. "Nella, will you come in, please?"

Pete turned expectantly toward the door, and when Nella opened it seconds later and entered the room from the outer office, he stood up.

"Nella," Farnsworth said, "you'll recall that you and I were discussing yesterday how difficult it must be for Pete to remain confined to his room."

"I remember the discussion, yes."

"Then you'll recall the suggestion I made at the time." Farnsworth leaned back in his chair.

Nella turned slowly toward Pete. "Dr. Farnsworth suggested that you be allowed greater freedom of movement within the Center itself."

"That room you gave me, it's not really a whole lot bigger than a cage," Pete commented.

"No healthy animal is ever really comfortable in a cage," Farnsworth said.

"Dr. Farnsworth," Nella continued, "suggested that you might like to visit with some of the staff here, Pete. He felt it might help to break the monotony of the routine you've been subjected to. All of us, as you know by now, are more or less confined to the building except in cases deemed emergencies. The restriction is necessary, we feel, in order to reduce the possibility of any of us contracting Virus Y. There are two men's dormitories on the lower

level—one for the attendants and one for the medical staff. A few of us have our own private quarters."

"What Nella is saying, Pete," Farnsworth explained, "is that we feel you should be allowed more elbow room, so to speak." He shook his head in chagrin. "It seems I can't stop sounding like a prison warden. Pete, I can only repeat that you are free to leave if you really want to leave. We have no right to detain you against your will. But let me say this: we need you, Pete. We need you very badly. I do hope you'll find it possible to stay with us until our experiments are completed."

Pete knew it was his turn to say something. "I'll stay, I guess, since you all need me so bad."

"Splendid!" Farnsworth exclaimed as he stood up and shook hands with a somewhat startled Pete. "I knew you wouldn't let us down! You're just not that kind of person." He sat down again. "Were you about to say something, Nella?"

"Pete, perhaps you'd like to come to my apartment for dinner. If Dr. Farnsworth has no objections, I'd be delighted to cook you a steak as thick as your wrist."

"No objections, not a one," Farnsworth said quickly. "The relaxation will do you both good."

"Now?" Pete asked.

Nella nodded.

"Steak," Pete said aloud as he followed her from Farnsworth's office. "Now that's one thing I can *guarantee* you I'm not allergic to."

They took the elevator to the sixth floor of the building and walked down the corridor. Nella stopped in front of a door with a metal sign which read CARLISLE. She unlocked the door and preceded Pete into the small apartment.

Her place didn't look to Pete at all the way he had expected it to. There were no curtains on the windows, only venetian blinds. The walls weren't pink and yellow or any other pretty color; they were gray. There was a dark sofa and several dark chairs. There was a desk with books on it but not the kind of books, Pete noticed immediately, that most people read. These had words in their titles that he

had never seen before and wouldn't trust himself to try to pronounce. Words like *lymphangiography* and *hemotherapist*. He had known it from the beginning—well, not quite the beginning—but soon afterward. She was intelligent. Soon after he realized that Nella wasn't the hooker he had first thought she was when Bronco brought her to the hotel, he had realized she was smart. That had made him a little nervous, her being smart. But it also gave him an odd sense of pride. Because smart as she was, she was still interested in him. Not as a stud named Pete Bratton, he realized, but interested just the same.

"This building was originally the home of one of the delegations to the United Nations," Nella told him. "They had a number of small apartments like this one built for members of their staff as well as visiting delegates. The lower floors contained conference rooms, reception rooms —that sort of thing. It's really quite comfortable."

"You live here now, huh?"

"Yes. Would you like a drink?"

"You mean a *real* drink? Not tea or buttermilk?"

Nella smiled. "A real drink. Something with a sting to it."

"Whiskey, you mean? Beer?"

Nella nodded.

"I sure would give a cold bottle of beer the glad hand. But—"

"But what?"

Pete jerked a thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the door. "The warden downstairs. What would he say?"

"The allergy sequence has been completed. Didn't he tell you? I'll get the beer."

When she had gone, Pete sat down on the sofa and put his slippered feet up on the little table in front of it. He became conscious of the loose, green gown they had given him to wear when he arrived and the terrycloth robe covering it. Hardly the kind of clothes a guy should wear when he gets himself invited to dinner by an intelligent girl. He'd ask Farnsworth for his own clothes back. First thing in the morning.

"Here you are," Nella said as she returned to the room. "One ice cold beer."

Pete took the bottle from her but refused the glass she offered him. The beer *tinged* on his tongue, which had become lazy under the onslaught of so much oatmeal and eggs. "Hey, now this is real fine!" he declared happily. "Aren't you having one?"

"I was just about to mix myself a Scotch and water." Nella went to the kitchen again and returned a moment later with a squat glass in which ice swirled in alcohol. "Cheers!" she said, raising her glass to her lips.

"Long life," Pete said and drank nearly half the beer in his bottle. He settled back against the sofa and sighed. "I feel like maybe I ought to thank the warden for letting me loose. For a while there I thought he'd forgotten that I was for real."

"What do you mean?"

"All those machines and needles. Sometimes I thought he looked at me like I was just one more gadget hanging around. That's the way it seemed to me, but I guess he's got a lot on his mind and couldn't help how he looked."

"Dr. Farnsworth does have a lot on his mind. He's been working up to twenty hours a day, seven days a week. We've all been very busy."

"Have you worked for him a long time?"

"Dr. Farnsworth? Yes, for several years." Nella raised her glass and drank. "And that is exactly the way to put it. One doesn't work *with* Dr. Farnsworth. One works *for* him. He's a man with a mission and a time table. One either accepts the mission and observes the timetable, or one is replaced."

"It must give you an awful lot of satisfaction," Pete said, "working in a place like this. I don't think I'd mind working twenty hours a day if it was for something like is going on here. If it was for something more than money, I mean."

"Money has very little to do with it. Dr. Farnsworth is much more interested in something far more negotiable than mere money. He wants success and the prestige and fame that come with it. Success is the emotional currency

in which men like our good doctor conduct their transactions. It doesn't cause cash register bells to ring, but it does bring an admiring look to the eyes of sycophants and bureaucrats. It puts a man on a throne and virtually guarantees him an instant empire. You do understand what I'm saying, don't you, Pete?"

"Sure. Being famous must be a lot of fun."

"You know something. You're really terribly perceptive, Pete, terribly. But success is more than a lot of fun for the James Farnsworth's of this world, let me assure you. Being successful—famous—feeds a very basic hunger in such men. Fame is the wine without which they would find the feast of life unpalatable. But with it—*ah!*" Nella placed her fingertips to her lips, blew a kiss into the room, and then drained her glass. "Let me tell you while I'm being so loquacious about the guests at the feast that fame prepares. They kick each other out of the way in order to get as close as possible to their host." She paused. "That's very interesting. I never thought of it quite that way before. Their host. Yes. The guests, you see, are parasites incapable of ever achieving fame on their own, so they settle for a simple proximity to the genuinely famous in order to avoid the extinction of their own bruised and weakened egos. The ladies of the famous king's court smile and curtsy at properly appointed times, and the jesters frolic, and afterwards the old retainers like Stefan Sikorsky sweep up the litter while hoping that no one notices that they're as obsolete as the brooms they use."

Pete watched Nella get up and go into the kitchen. When she came back with an even fuller glass this time, he wondered if intelligent women like her always got drunk on their first Scotch and water. Maybe their brains were too delicate to take the booze. But she didn't really seem drunk. She seemed mad. And sad at the same time. Hard to figure. Maybe she talked this way all the time, even when she was cold sober. All her talk about feasts and fame sounded to Pete a lot like poetry. He supposed it all made sense if you knew how to figure out poetry—what it really meant underneath all the fancy words.

"Have another beer," Nella said, gesturing toward the kitchen. "Go on, help yourself. Feel free."

Pete got up and went into the kitchen and opened a second bottle of beer. This time when he sat down in the living room, he didn't put his feet up on the little table.

There was something about Nella, he noticed, something about the way she sat in her chair with her feet placed firmly on the floor in front of her and her hands circling her glass that put him on edge. He'd never seen anyone well on the way to getting blind drunk without them also getting relaxed as a part of the bargain, but he guessed he was seeing it now. She sat like a statue, stiff and staring over his shoulder at whatever might be there. He drank his beer and tried to keep the conversation going.

"What's that?" he asked, pointing.

Nella reached out and touched the machine on the table. "A tape recorder. We record our progress reports on it. The reports are then duplicated, and the tapes sent to every governmental agency in the alphabet." She leaned forward and pressed a button.

"—and there is massive damage to the lymphoid system," Dr. Farnsworth's voice pronounced solemnly as the wheels of the machine turned and Nella raised her glass in what might have been a silent toast. "The results of our autopsies on victims of Virus Y show that the histiocytes which normally act to combat disease fail to engulf this new and as yet unidentified infectious agent. This severe breakdown in the lymphoid system leads to a reduction in blood-cell formation, which in turn leads to a significant reduction in the oxygen supply throughout the body, particularly in the brain. Thus, patients suffer delusions and hallucinations and, inevitably, permanent brain damage followed by death.

"Although we can trace the course the disease follows, we remain unable to detect and isolate the specific causative agent which—"

Nella pressed the button to silence Farnsworth.

"That didn't sound quite like him," Pete observed. "He sounded different."

"One does sound a bit different on this thing. Would you like to hear what your voice sounds like?"

Nella turned on the machine again and adjusted the speed to reach a clear section of tape. She wiggled her fingers almost playfully at Pete. "Go ahead. Say something."

"Like what?"

"Oh, Christ, I don't know. Recite the Gettysburg Address. Or the Pledge of Allegiance. Anything."

Pete was too embarrassed to admit that he had never learned the former and had forgotten the latter. "My name is Pete Bratton," he said, trying to sound nonchalant.

"Louder," Nella said, adjusting the volume dial. "Speak up."

"I don't know nothing about science, but I guess science knows a lot about me by this time. Ha-ha."

Nella sat back, holding her glass in both hands, watching Pete.

For a moment he couldn't think of anything more to say. But then, just as all the words in the world seemed to have deserted him, Nella said, "What would you wish for if you could have three wishes?"

He immediately thought of those penthouses with the girls you could call up if you had the cash. And then of a wallet of fine leather, one that was never empty—that was magical. He said, "I wish they'd find a cure for Virus Y."

Nella set down her empty glass and brushed back a stray strand of hair from her face. "Why? Why do you wish we'd find a cure?"

"It's what you've all been wanting so bad, isn't it?"

Nella sighed and said, "Yes, it's what we all want so badly. But what do you want? You've got two wishes left."

Pete scratched his head and thought hard. There were so many things worth wishing for and him with only two wishes left. How was a guy to pick the right wishes, so he'd be sure to get the most for his money? He could wish for a million dollars. Now wasn't that just like him! Wasn't that *dumb?* While he was wishing, he might as well wish for five million. *Ten!* Nella was waiting for him to say something, and he didn't think she'd think that ten

million dollars was so special. What did she expect him to wish? he wondered.

"I don't hardly know how to choose just two things among so many," he said.

He had expected Nella to laugh and agree that the choice was hard all right, but she said nothing. She merely sat there waiting and watching him.

"I wish Mitzi wasn't dead."

"Mitzi? Oh, you're referring to the burlesque queen who succumbed to Virus Y."

"Burlesque queen? Mitzi? She wasn't a burlesque queen. She was just an ordinary person. She wasn't the main attraction. The main attraction was this girl named Laverne, who used to twirl two tassels tied to her tits—"

Nella collapsed in laughter, bent over, shaking, holding herself with both arms wrapped around her body. When she recovered, she drew a deep breath, wiped her eyes, and said, "You look so shocked! You don't dare look me in the eye!" She was silent for a moment. When she spoke again, her voice was low. "Why did you wish that Mitzi wasn't dead?"

"She—I—" There was nothing to say, no way to explain. He was becoming vaguely angry with Nella. Why did she keep asking him to explain everything? Thinking up three wishes was hard enough without being forced to explain why he had thought them up in the first place or what he meant by wishing them in the second place.

"You've got one more wish."

"Only one more? Then I'd better make this one a whopper, huh? This is my last chance, right?"

Suddenly, he wished, in a voice not quite like his normal one, in a voice that had the sound of a wild and unexpected storm swirling within it, for the phone next to Nella to ring and for it to be Bronco asking to talk to his friend Pete Bratton.

Nella reached out quickly and shut off the tape recorder. She stared at it in silence for a moment and then looked up at Pete.

"That's not what I intended to wish at all," he told her angrily. "I sure did blow it, didn't I? My third wish—my

last one—and that's the best I could come up with. I meant to wish for money and a girl—"

"Shut up!" Nella practically shouted at him. "Please, just shut up now."

What was the matter with her? It had been a sort of game, hadn't it? Nella looked to Pete as if she was going to cry, and he hoped to hell she wasn't because he wouldn't know what to say to her to make her stop and he wouldn't dare touch her when she was so mad . . .

"I'll get dinner," she said suddenly and stood up. "Would you like to hear how your voice sounds on the tape?" Without waiting for a reply she pushed the rewind button and a moment later pressed a button and went into the kitchen.

Pete listened to the odd sound of his own voice as it invaded the quiet room.

". . . an ordinary person. She wasn't the main attraction. The main attraction was this girl named Laverne, who used to twirl two tassels tied to her—"

He leaped up and shut the machine off.

Well, hell, what if Nella *had* heard him again? She'd laughed the first time, hadn't she? He decided that it wasn't what Nella might think of him that was bothering him. Not altogether anyway. What was really bothering him—well, would he ever get any kind of control over what came out of his mouth? He never said the right thing at the right time, or else he said the wrong thing to the wrong person. He didn't know which was worse.

"Lassoed and laid flat on the plate!" Nella called out to him from the kitchen. "Right?"

"Yes, ma'am!" Pete yelled back and went to stand in the doorway of the small kitchen. "My now, doesn't that look just plain fine!" he told her, pointing to the nearly raw steak she had just placed on a plate. "It makes my mouth water fit to drown my teeth, just looking at that there steak."

They ate then, sitting silently across from one another at the tiny kitchen table. Pete ate rapidly after shaking nearly half of the ketchup bottle's on his steak. When he

had finished it, he looked up at Nella and said, "You're some cook, did anybody ever tell you? I haven't had a steak this good since—well, not in one long time, I can tell you."

"Thank you for the compliment but I don't really deserve it. Rare steaks are about the easiest thing in the world to cook. You turn the flame high in the broiler, you flip the meat over once and, *voilà!* But you didn't eat your salad."

"My salad. Well, I never did take to chomping lettuce and like that. My ma, she used to say that if all the steers up and disappeared from the earth one day or if the potato crop failed, I'd be in genuine trouble. She meant that I've always been a meat and potatoes man. Nothing fancy for me. Just plain food is all."

"May I ask you something?"

Why wouldn't she call him by his name? Why wouldn't she, just one time, call him Pete? If she didn't, he sure couldn't feel comfortable calling her Nella. And he wanted to call her Nella. "Sure, you can."

"Why don't you leave here?"

"Here? Oh, you mean the Center. I could, I guess. But I sort of gave my word to the warden that I wouldn't."

"I see."

"I'd only be kidding you if I said I had someplace important to go. I don't. So I might as well stay and see if I can help you all out with your tests and experiments." *Experiments.* The word triggered something in Pete. His forehead wrinkled as he rubbed his knuckles against it. "You know, there's something Dr. Farnsworth said the other day that sort of confused me. Remember when he talked about transplants? Now what do you suppose he meant by that?"

Nella suggested that they return to the living room. She poured two small glasses of brandy before answering Pete's question. "Dr. Farnsworth suggested that I talk to you about a plan we've all been working on in conjunction with our Virus Y research. Would you like some more coffee?"

Pete shook his head. "What about these transplants?"

"Did you know that Fulton Chapling has contracted the disease?"

"No," Pete replied. "I didn't know that. Who's Fulton Chapling?"

"Dr. Chapling won a Nobel Prize last year. His work is in genetics, specifically the creation of human life to preprogramed specifications. He is one of the most brilliant men of our time. But he'll be lost to us soon. Most of his early work has been published, of course, but his laboratory was raided by a band of looters during the riots in New Orleans last month, and most of his recent notes were destroyed. He had his best years still ahead of him. There is no telling what further contributions he might have made to science. Now we'll probably never know."

"You mean he's got a chance of getting better?"

"No, I didn't say that. He won't get better. He's going to die just like all the others who have the disease."

"But you said we'd *probably* never know what he might have come up with if he'd lived. I thought you meant he might still have a chance."

Nella looked down at her hands and began to turn the hammered silver ring on her finger. "Fulton Chapling may have a chance, Pete. You could be his chance."

Pete tried a smile first and then a frown. He had lost Nella somewhere. *He* could be Fulton Chapling's chance? He tried going back over what she had said, but most of it had already escaped him, and all he knew for sure was that she had called him Pete, and he thought his name sounded just fine when she said it out loud.

"Dr. Farnsworth," Nella went on, "will discuss the matter with you in detail in the morning, Pete. But he thought I should mention it to you first. You see, we are certain now that you did suffer a mild case of Virus Y which was of unusually short duration and—"

"Mitzi?"

"Yes, Mitzi. We don't know why, but it appears that your immune system successfully fought off the infection. Yours was a rather mysterious reaction to the disease, to put it mildly, but one which was completely successful.

The infectious agent was completely destroyed by a massive reaction of your immune system."

"So Bronco guessed right."

"Yes, he did."

"Wait a minute. How can you be really sure I'm immune? Maybe I never actually did catch it from Mitzi."

"We're now convinced that you did. Dr. Farnsworth undertook to test that hypothesis in the only way possible."

"What way?"

"Those blood tests—"

"What about them?"

"Not all of them were actually blood tests. Dr. Farnsworth instructed Dr. Sikorsky to inject into your bloodstream some blood taken from—from Fulton Chapling. Dr. Chapling was brought here some weeks ago under the auspices of the federal government after the raid on his laboratory. Federal officials felt he would be safer here and that he might possibly make a contribution to the research we have underway. But then he became ill, and so that was no longer possible. At present he's in an isolation room on the eighth floor."

"Oh, boy!" Pete exclaimed, rising and moving nervously about the room. "Now that sure is something all right!" He swung around to confront Nella. "I could have been killed! What if I wasn't immune? What if I *wasn't!*"

"But all the evidence pointed to the fact that you were!"

"All the evidence, my ass! Farnsworth didn't *know!* You practically said so yourself. Did he know? Did he know for *sure?*"

Nella looked away, her expression unreadable. "Not for sure, no. That's why he had to—"

Pete slammed a fist into the palm of his hand. "You people with all your big talk about saving the world! Why, you didn't even ask me to sign nothing before you started doing things to me. That Farnsworth just went and got Doc Sikorsky to shoot the bug into me, and then you all stood around waiting to see if I was going to drop dead.

And I never even *knew!* Nobody told *me!*" He paused, looking up at the ceiling. "It figures, I guess. You get your hands on a guy like me who nobody would notice if he goes on living or if he just drops out of sight. But what I don't get— You all must have thought you could get away with *murder!* Because that's what it would have been if it just happened to turn out that I wasn't immune. And the funny thing—hey, Nella, you want to know a funny thing?"

"Pete, I—"

"The really funny thing is you would have got away with it. You could have told anybody who ever asked, if anybody ever did, that I just got the sickness, and that was that. They'd have believed you. You all knew that, didn't you?"

"Pete, what Jim—what Dr. Farnsworth did was necessary. It was—"

"All it was was what he wanted. What *you* wanted. All of you! Well, I'm getting the hell out of here right now. Where are my clothes?"

"Let me try to explain why we had to do it."

"I know why you did it."

"No, you don't know. You asked me what Dr. Farnsworth meant when he mentioned transplants earlier in the week."

When Pete said nothing, Nella hurried on. "He wasn't talking about organ transplants. He was talking about memory transplants. I'll try to make this as brief as possible. Before Virus Y struck the world, a Japanese psychologist Professor Toshitado Shimizu—had been researching the possibility of transferring learned information from one brain to another. His work was highly theoretical at first, but when it reached the experimental stage, Professor Shimizu succeeded in transferring specific elements of learning from one rat to another."

Pete snorted. "I'm no rat."

"Professor Shimizu took a rat that had been raised in a normal environment with other rats and had been used in a number of learning experiments. He injected brain ex-

tracts from the donor rat into a second rat. Subsequent testing proved that the second rat, when confronted with problems outside his experience, could nevertheless solve them because the donor rat had learned to solve them previously. The second rat could run mazes correctly on the first try—for example. Mazes it had never been in before."

"Where are my clothes? Are you going to tell me, or am I going to have to raise a little hell?"

"Pete, give me ten more minutes to explain and then you can decide what you want to do.

"I've already decided. I'm getting out of here. I'm no rat."

"Five more minutes?"

"Two."

"Two then. You see, Dr. Farnsworth realized that if the knowledge of a man like Fulton Chapling—a man who is inevitably going to die soon—could be stored in another human brain—well, don't you see? That knowledge wouldn't be lost to the world even though the man himself will be. But the problem confronting us was, of course, to find a safe repository, so to speak. The idea seemed impractical, because we never knew who the disease would strike next. If we transplanted the molecular extracts taken from Chapling's brain into man A, we never knew when man A might become ill and we would have to repeat the whole process."

"And then I came along."

"And then you came along. Pete, don't you understand? You can save the knowledge of a man like Fulton Chapling so that if a cure is eventually found, the world will not have been deprived of one of its greatest minds. Now you see why Dr. Farnsworth did what he did. He was playing for very high stakes and under severe pressure. He did it for mankind."

Pete took a step backward as Nella rose and came toward him.

"I'll get your clothes," she said. "They're in a locker off the lab. They've been sterilized."

"So let's go."

Nella walked to the door, but before she opened it, she turned back to Pete and said, "Suppose Mitzi had been the one who knew what Chapling knows. What would you have done in that case? Would you have refused to cooperate?"

"It's not the same thing!" Pete bellowed and reached for the doorknob.

Nella seized his hand. "Only the names are different. The principle is the same. Look, Pete, I have nothing to gain by trying to convince you to stay. Well, that's not altogether true. When Dr. Farnsworth suggested to me that you might like to visit with some of the staff members, I suggested to him that you might like to have dinner here with me."

The warmth of Nella's hand on his wrist distracted Pete from his intention of leaving. He felt the familiar tautness in his groin and wished she was just a hooker after all, like he'd thought when he first saw her. If that's all she was, then he wouldn't have any problem. He'd throw her down on that sofa over there and fuck her, and then he'd find his clothes by himself and cut out. But she wasn't a hooker, and if he was going to get to fuck her—which was what he wanted to do, he realized—then he was going to have to let her think he was playing along with her and Farnsworth.

It occurred to him that she probably didn't get a chance to meet too many studs. Scientists weren't what he'd call real men. They paid entirely too much attention to their books and machines. Well, she had met him, and he thought he knew just the right kind of goodbye present to give her, one that would keep her from forgetting him too fast.

He took her hands in his. "You don't have to worry about catching nothing from me," he told her and then pulled her close to him. "I'm immune." He reached behind her and switched off the lights. "I never liked to do it in the light. Which way's the bedroom?"

Nella couldn't answer him because his mouth was suddenly on hers, and his tongue was breaking through the

barrier of her teeth. He held her against him for several seconds and then let her lead him slowly through the darkened living room.

Once inside the bedroom he took off his robe and pulled the green hospital gown over his head. "You ready?" he asked the shadow standing beside him.

Nella responded by slipping off her blouse. She quickly removed the rest of her clothes. "Where are you?" she whispered, aware that he was no longer beside her.

"Look," he said from somewhere in the darkness.

She turned at the sound of his voice and saw him silhouetted against the faint light coming through the window. He was standing with his hands on his hips, his pelvis thrust forward.

"The warden wants to fool around with my head. But this is what you wanted to fool around with from the beginning, right? Well, how do you like it? Is it big enough for you?"

Because he was looking down at himself as if making his own evaluation, Pete didn't see Nella shudder as she moved toward the bed and laid down upon it.

He came over to her, knelt on the bed for a moment, and then he laughed softly and straddled her as she lay beneath him in the stillness and shadow. "First you tried to screw me," he told her harshly. "Now it's my turn to screw you."

He pulled her legs apart and flopped down upon her like a beached fish. After a brief moment of fumbling about, he began to rock upon her, his face hidden in her hair. She neither responded nor attempted to push him away, which brought him to the conclusion that she sure wasn't very experienced. No wonder. Hanging around guys like Farnsworth as long as she had, why, all her juices had probably dried up. As he thrust himself into a darkness deeper than the room around him, he thought about what it might be like if he decided to stick around for a while. Nella might turn out to be a pretty fair fuck once he got her sap to rising. She might even turn out to be grateful to him for ending her long drought.

He applied himself to her with a desire that bordered on vengeance. He was eventually rewarded by the eagerly sought and sudden explosion of himself that evoked no noticeable response in the one who lay so silently beneath him in the thick dark.

Chapter six

Nella had said the locker was on the fourth floor in a room adjoining the laboratory. It was a storage room, she had said, and Pete would find his clothes there.

He arrived at the lab, entered it, and stopped short when he found it occupied by a white-coated woman. He hadn't expected to find anybody present at this hour. He had glanced at the clock on the night table next to Nella's bed before leaving her apartment, and it had said twenty minutes before two.

"Yes?" the woman said, looking up from behind a gleaming aluminum table.

"I've come to get my clothes," Pete said. "They're supposed to be in a storage room around here somewhere."

"Through that door down there," the woman said curtly and bent over her microscope.

"Thanks." Pete went through the door the woman had pointed out to him. The room he entered was cluttered with stacks of pasteboard boxes and seemingly haphazard piles of file folders. He searched among the soiled laboratory coats hanging on the iron rack and soon found a hanger bearing a small white tag on which someone had typed "P. Bratton."

He stepped behind a tall crate and pulled off his robe and gown. He took down the hanger and stared for a moment at his clothes. A pair of faded Levis. A striped cotton shirt. Jockey shorts, an out-of-shape T-shirt, and on the floor, a pair of scuffed black boots. All he owned in the world. Suddenly he remembered that he had had one dollar and forty-eight cents when he arrived at the Center. He'd spent a dime to call Bronco at the hotel. Now where

was the remaining dollar and thirty-eight cents? Not in his pockets, he quickly discovered.

He dressed and went back into the laboratory. "Excuse me, ma'am."

The woman looked up from her microscope in evident annoyance. "Yes?"

He told her about the missing money.

"I know nothing about it. If you don't mind, I really must get on with my work."

Pete strode angrily past the snotty bitch. These scientist types were some stiff shit, no doubt about it.

He had almost reached the door leading to the corridor, when it swung open and Farnsworth appeared.

"Well," he said, "if it isn't Pete. What's the trouble? Couldn't sleep? I've got a sure cure for insomnia. Come on with me and we'll see what we can find in the cafeteria refrigerator. Nobody can sleep on an empty stomach."

"I already ate," Pete said. "Up at Nella's place."

Farnsworth's lean arm shot out and slid around Pete's shoulder. Before Pete quite knew what was happening, he found himself walking down the corridor beside Farnsworth, who was asking him if he'd enjoyed his dinner date.

"Yes, sir," Pete replied. "Nella's a good cook."

Farnsworth winked at him. "And a very attractive girl, don't you agree?"

Pete didn't like the wink. He'd seen that wink before in bars and beside railroad tracks where weak campfires blazed. That wink was a kind of secret male signal that said more than whatever words accompanied it. That wink was the fuse on the bomb of a dirty joke getting ready to explode. Somehow it seemed worse, that wink, when it came from a doctor and had to do with Nella Carlisle.

"Or isn't she your type?" Farnsworth asked as they entered the deserted cafeteria. "Perhaps you like women with a bit more flesh on their bones. I've told Nella she's far too thin for her own good."

"She's okay."

"Here we are," Farnsworth said, swinging open the huge door of the refrigerator. "Help yourself. There's some barbequed chicken, roast beef—help yourself."

When they were seated at one of the cafeteria's tables, Farnsworth bit into his hastily made ham sandwich, swallowed, and said, "You look much more relaxed tonight than you have in the past few days. I'm genuinely sorry we had to keep you in isolation for so long, but I'm sure you understand that it was necessary. In any event, that's all changed now. Tomorrow we'll—"

"I won't be here tomorrow," Pete declared.

"What's that?"

"I'm leaving."

"You're leaving?"

"Nella told me about what you intended to do to me. She told me all about transplanting that Chapling fellow's brain into mine. No dice, Doc."

Farnsworth took another bite out of his sandwich. "This is really very good," he commented and then, "Nella must have failed to explain our plan to you properly. We have no intention of transplanting anyone's brain. That is simply not possible. What we actually planned to do was transplant the *content* of Dr. Chapling's mind chemically by means of molecular extracts. It's a simple enough matter involving nothing more than an injection of the donor extracts into the body of the recipient. Once Dr. Chapling's knowledge became, in effect, your knowledge, we would then—with your cooperation—record and catalog that knowledge for later use. As I said, Nella must have failed to explain the matter to you properly.

"Actually, I suppose her failure is my fault. I shouldn't have used the word transplant to describe the transfer. The word is literally correct, of course, but misleading. One immediately finds oneself thinking of organ transplants and major surgery—that sort of thing. That's what you were thinking about, wasn't it, Pete?"

Pete admitted that yes, that's what he had been thinking about, and he didn't want any operation, especially no brain operation.

"It is merely a matter of a simple injection," Farnsworth said and took another bite of his sandwich.

"Like the injection you told Doc Sikorsky to give me

that could have given me a case of Virus Y? Is that the kind of injection you got in mind to give me?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Nella told me about how you shot some of Chapling's blood into me to see if I really was immune."

Farnsworth made a sound of dismay. He started to shake his head, his eyes on Pete, and then he said, "Obviously, I made an error of judgment in asking Nella to broach the subject with you. Didn't she explain to you that we knew you were immune and that blood transfusion was merely to finalize that fact—to validate it once and for all?"

"Well, she did say you were all pretty sure I was immune," Pete admitted, trying to recall Nella's exact words but able only to remember the lush feel of her flesh in his hands. "But anyway, I don't like the idea. I don't like the idea of having somebody else's mind mixed in with my own."

"Let me try to reassure you, Pete," Farnsworth said. "Experiments have proven that molecular matter extracted from a person's brain and injected into the body of another person has a regrettably short life. The new knowledge thus transferred endures for a relatively brief time. The important thing from our point of view, of course, is that it does endure, however briefly. That small amount of time would be all we'd need. It would be enough to allow us to record Chapling's ideas and the facts concerning his recent research—his notes were destroyed when his laboratory was looted. Pete, surely you can understand how vital this matter is. You are the only person who can insure that Chapling's knowledge will not die when he does. You can't refuse to help us!"

"Oh, yes, I can," Pete retorted, but his voice lacked resonance. "You'll just have to find yourself somebody else."

"There *is* no one else, Pete. It's as simple as that. But you're right. You can refuse. You can refuse to preserve the knowledge of the world's most brilliant geneticist. You can refuse to children yet unborn the benefits of Fulton Chapling's findings on the prevention of birth defects. You

can refuse to contribute to saving lives through the genetic programming to eliminate such diseases as leukemia and certain forms of cancer. Did you know that Chapling only recently made a breakthrough in genetic manipulation that promises to cancel the predisposition of certain types of people to develop those diseases?"

Pete felt his face redden, and he wished he'd moved faster. He wished he'd gotten out of here before Farnsworth had bumped into him. Farnsworth was making him feel like a bastard. The only other time he remembered feeling so lousy was when a bunch of guys he ran around with in high school got caught gang-banging ugly Eloise Simpson, who had turned into the town whore by the time she was thirteen. When the police questioned him, he'd said yeah, he'd been there and slipped it to her just like all the other guys did, only he hadn't, and now he remembered the contempt in Eloise's eyes as she sat in the police station watching him and saying nothing. Farnsworth was looking at him and saying nothing. Farnsworth was looking at him like Eloise had looked at him that time.

"Pete, I wish I didn't have to tell Fulton that you object to the transfer. You see, it's not that he minds dying so much. He's accepted the inevitability of that event with a truly remarkable calm. But he had hoped, when I first told him about Professor Shimizu's experiments and the chance they offered for his work to survive long after his own death—" Farnsworth paused and looked down at his plate. "He cried, Pete. He cried with relief like a child awakened from a nightmare who finds that what he has dreamed really isn't true. But perhaps he'll understand when I explain how you feel. I'll try to make him understand. After all, we all have our own selfish drives, our own desires which we usually put above all else."

"How come Nella never got married?" Pete asked, trying to ignore everything Farnsworth had just said.

Farnsworth was taken back for a moment. but he quickly recovered. "Why, I don't really know. Perhaps she prefers to be alone."

"Nobody does."

Farnsworth's expression altered subtly. "She likes you, Pete. She told me so. She said—can you take the truth, Pete? Not many people can."

"I can. What did she say about me?"

"She said she'd seldom met anyone as obtuse in so many ways as you are, but neither had she ever met anyone quite so decent."

"I know what decent means. But what's obtuse?"

"It means dull. Slow to understand. But she does like you very much—maybe because she's tired of being around people like me who always seem to know it all or who, if they don't, like to pretend that they do. I recall the way she put it when I asked her why she liked you despite what she called your obtuseness. She said she couldn't possibly dislike a man who called his sorrel mare Bella and who shared the stars with her."

So Nella had remembered him telling her about the mare and the stars that filled the Colorado sky almost every night. Pete suddenly wished he had been gentler with her earlier. But he had wanted to make her understand that if you just went around doing things to people and not caring what those people thought about it, well, you couldn't expect people to care all that much about you when it came your turn to be done to. He wished he had known that she remembered about the mare and the stars before he had climbed on top of her. He just might have done the whole thing different.

"What made you ask if Nella was married?" Farnsworth inquired, interrupting Pete's thoughts.

Pete shrugged and said something about just being curious.

"A woman like Nella Carlisle is certainly capable of arousing a man's curiosity," Farnsworth commented. "It's a pity you won't have the opportunity to get to know her better."

"I know her pretty good as it is," Pete said, remembering. "But if you don't mind my asking about another thing that's been on my mind— What I mean is, I had one dollar and thirty-eight cents the night I came here, and I don't have it now. I checked my pockets, and it's gone."

Farnsworth stood up and beckoned to Pete. "If you'll come to my office, I'll reimburse you. I'll also add a little something to the sum in payment for services rendered."

Pete followed Farnsworth from the cafeteria and down the hall to the elevator. Neither man spoke until they reached the eighth floor of the building. Then Farnsworth said, "Right through here, please."

Pete hesitated. He had thought they were going to Farnsworth's office. But this wasn't the right floor. Before he had a chance to speak, Farnsworth had unlocked the door and practically pushed him into the gloom. Instantly, the door was slammed shut behind him, and Pete heard it being locked.

"Hey!" he yelled, startled. As if in response to his outcry, the ceiling lights flashed on in the room.

"Who are you?" asked the thin man lying in the bed. His words were spoken with spaces between them as if he possessed little breath with which to utter them. "Do I know you?"

Pete stared at the man's thick hair that clouded the pillow, white on white. There was a faint glow to the man's skin, a pink glow on his exposed face and slender hands.

"Fulton," came Farnsworth's voice over the intercom system. "Fulton, I'm sorry to bother you at this hour, but I thought you'd like to meet the young man I mentioned to you. Fulton, this is Pete Bratton, Pete, may I introduce Dr. Fulton Chapling."

"You tricked me!" Pete roared and began to pound furiously on the locked door. "Open up!"

"Please calm down," Farnsworth said. "You're immune, Pete, remember? I told you we would go to my office, where I would return your money. And we will go there—in just a moment or two. But I wanted you to stop here first because Dr. Chapling has been most eager to meet you."

Fulton Chapling raised his head slightly and blinked in the light's harsh glare. His large gray eyes were bright with the gloss of fever. "Young man," he whispered. He raised one hand in a gesture that was neither supplication nor greeting but something else—an attempt to touch Pete.

"Young man, I am—am—immensely grateful to you. I—" He slipped backward, unable to maintain his semi-upright position in the bed.

Without thinking, Pete responded to Chapling's distress. He crossed to the bed and pulled and pushed at the pillows until Chapling was able to prop himself up with their aid.

"How soon can we make the transfer?" Chapling looked from Pete to the bland face of the intercom. "Jim?"

The intercom was silent.

Pete said too loudly, "Look, you got me wrong. I'm not your man."

Chapling sank down into the pillows, his eyes on Pete's face, their brightness dimming slightly. "Are you saying that there is to be no transfer? Mr. Bratton, is that what you're saying?"

Pete looked down at the floor.

"No transfer," Chapling repeated. "Well, I won't ask you why. It doesn't matter. If it is not to be, there is no point in trying to analyze your motives for refusing. Neither will I try to persuade you. But I do have one question."

Pete continued to stare at the floor in order to avoid facing the strange pink glow of Chapling's already crystallizing skin and the gemlike brightness of the old man's eyes.

"In your travels, Mr. Bratton—I've been told you've traveled widely—have you met anyone else—anyone else who might be immune? I have almost no more time left. A day. Two perhaps. If you know of someone who might help—Do you, Mr. Bratton?"

Pete considered lying. Why not tell the old man that yeah, he knew someone. Someone who was immune and had a heart of pure gold, who'd be real glad to be a guinea pig. But he couldn't. Even if the lie made the old man happy for the day or two he had left, he couldn't. Not because he minded lying but because he was pretty sure the old man was smart enough to know if he was lying or not and he didn't think he could stand being caught lying to a guy who was already up to his ass in his grave.

"Pete," Farnsworth said over the intercom. "Dr. Chapling asked you a question."

"No, sir, there's only me so far as I know."

"Only you," Chapling sighed. "Did Dr. Farnsworth tell you why the transfer means so much to me, Mr. Bratton?"

"No, Fulton," Farnsworth said. "I didn't have a chance to tell him."

"I had a daughter," Chapling said, "who died at birth because she was badly deformed. That was many long years ago, but I still think of her. I imagine her sometimes as a child with her toys or as a lovely young woman whose smile—Her death determined the direction my research subsequently took. I wanted to eliminate the probability, if not the possibility, of such deadly birth defects. Much of my work, as you may know, has been destroyed by those who invaded my laboratory during the recent riots—the written records of my experiments, all my tapes. But there is no point in going on with this. I'm pleased to have met you, Mr. Bratton. I'm sure you have things to do, and it is unfair of me to detain you any longer. I congratulate you on your immunity and trust that you will enjoy a long and fruitful life."

Something was happening. Something was causing Pete to waver in his decision to leave. It wasn't Chapling's words in themselves, but something that lay beneath them, just below their surface. Or maybe it wasn't that odd something hiding below Chapling's words. Maybe it was his own fresh memory of Nella's naked body and the rich potential it contained for love. Perhaps it was simply that he was keenly aware of the fact that he hadn't anything better to do. Then, too, if he stayed and became famous for what he did, people all over would know his name, wouldn't they? It was a combination of all these elements mixed together in just the right proportions that was weakening his will to leave. Pete didn't know what the formula was, but he did know that it was having an effect on him.

"Let me out of here!" he shouted in anger at the inter-

A moment later Farnsworth unlocked the door. "I'm

really very sorry, Fulton," he said over Pete's shoulder, "but perhaps someone else will turn up in time."

"No one will," Chapling murmured. "No one."

Pete groaned and smashed his fist against the wall. "*Okay!*" he shouted. "Okay, goddammit! I'll stick around awhile because—"

"Splendid!" Farnsworth exclaimed. He seized Pete's hand and shook it vigorously. "Fulton, did you hear? He's consented to the transfer!"

Chapling's hand rose again as it had earlier. He reached out to Pete, a small smile on his face, and then his hand fell limply back on the bed. "Thank you, Mr. Bratton. I thank you very much."

"I'll tell Stefan," Farnsworth declared happily. "We'll make the transfer first thing in the morning. We'll—"

But Pete didn't hear anymore because he was striding briskly down the corridor toward the elevator. Farnsworth had interrupted him before he'd had a chance to explain why he had changed his mind about leaving. It was just as well, because he still wasn't sure what had made him decide to remain when he could have gone his own way and not even looked back at the emptiness his leaving would have caused in the clean arena of Crisis Control Center. The odd thing about his decision, he realized with no small surprise, was that it had left him feeling relieved. He felt as if he had just agreed to repay a debt that he hadn't, until just a little while ago, even realized he owed.

He entered the elevator when it came and soon found himself in front of the door to his room. But instead of opening it, he turned and bounded impulsively up the steps to the sixth floor. He reached Nella's door and knocked softly. When there was no immediate response, he knocked again, more loudly.

She opened the door a few moments later, and when she saw Pete, she leaned her forehead against the door frame. "It's after three o'clock," she said in a voice slowed by sleepiness.

"About what happened before—" Pete began and halted.

"What do you want?"

He couldn't help grinning as her stern expression dissolved in an enormous yawn. What did he want? He wanted—someone to be with, a place to belong, a way to make the night not seem so dark. He said, "I'm sorry about before."

Nella brushed back her hair. "So am I."

Now what was she sorry about? He was the one who had plowed up her pasture like a bull with the smell of spring fresh in his nose. She didn't have anything to be sorry about.

"You want to come in," she said.

He wasn't sure if she had given him an invitation or simply stated a fact. "I went back to my room, only I—"

"Come in." She stepped back into the darkness that filled the apartment and he followed her.

He could no longer see her, but he heard her moving away from him. He suppressed the urge to grab her and hold her close to him and wait until she told him that everything was okay, he'd be okay, everybody got lonely sometimes. He suddenly wanted to run from the room because his being in it made no sense and she probably knew that and would laugh at him after he'd gone.

"You've decided to stay at the Center," she said from the depths of the darkness surrounding them both.

"How'd you know that? I only said I would a coupla minutes ago."

"That's why you came back here. Because you've decided to stay, and you're not sure you should. You want me to tell you that you made the right decision. You want me to say that it was the right thing to do, the only thing under the circumstances. You're frightened."

"Jesus!" was all Pete could manage. It was unbelievable. *She* was unbelievable. It was as if she had a special connection hooked into his head and it let her read his mind.

Nella turned on a lamp and sat down on the sofa, her legs bent beneath her, her nightdress spilling over them. "Why did you decide to stay?"

"How did you know I decided?"

She was staring at him, and he found it impossible to

read her expression. "It doesn't matter how I knew," she told him.

"Tell me how."

"When you were here before, you were angry. You already knew what you were going to do if anyone put pressure on you, and you knew you didn't really want to do it. So you punished me because you thought I was the one who was making you do it. You were wrong, of course. Oh, I admit I encouraged you to stay. But you were the one you wanted to punish. You wanted to hurt that part of yourself that always gives in to people like Dr. Farnsworth and your friend Bronco and me."

"Wait a minute." Pete crossed the room and sat down beside Nella. "Bronco and you—you're two different kinds of people."

"Are we?"

"Sure, you are. Anybody can see that."

"Bronco turned you over to us. He wasn't interested in helping to cure Virus Y. He was only interested in the money Dr. Farnsworth agreed to pay him for telling us where you were."

Pete rubbed the back of his neck, which had begun to ache. "When I told you how Bronco didn't mind me hanging around here, that he said he'd wait for me— He wasn't waiting for me. He'd already checked out of that hotel. Only you probably guessed that much since you knew about the money he got."

Nella remained silent.

"What I don't get is why you put yourself in the same cage as a bear like Bronco. That don't make any kind of sense to me."

"You talked to Dr. Farnsworth tonight?"

"Yeah. He came into the laboratory just as I was leaving."

"I telephoned him and told him you were planning to leave. I told him that I thought you could be prevailed upon to stay if he handled you properly. Evidently, he did."

"You wanted me to stay then?"

Nella made a small sound and turned away.

"Listen, I'm glad you wanted me to stay. It makes things a lot easier for me. Because you were right before when you said I was scared. I don't like the idea of what they're fixing to do to me tomorrow, if you want to know the truth. I can tell you I don't like it one little bit. But you wanting me to stay and go through with it—that helps, it really does. You get what I'm driving at?"

Nella stood up, went to the window, and stared down into the empty parking lot. "I never said I wanted you to stay."

Pete stared at her slim back, feeling confused. Hadn't she admitted she had tried to persuade him to stay. Isn't that why she'd called Farnsworth—to stop him from leaving?

Nella turned from the window. "There's not much to do at three o'clock in the morning except tell the truth. It's too late to alter what was done the day before and too early to make a fresh start. Yes, I wanted you to stay. For several reasons. Dr. Farnsworth needs you as does Fulton Chapling. Even though we couldn't determine the cause of your immunity and therefore can't get any closer than we are already to a cure for Virus Y as a result, we need you for an equally important purpose— the preservation of Chapling's work by means of the brain extract transfer.

"I helped them succeed in detaining you. Helping Dr. Farnsworth is my job. But there was another reason. My own private reason. I wanted you. In fact, I want you right now, despite my earlier behavior. You see, my wanting hasn't anything to do with reason or good sense. It has to do with the fact that I'm a woman, and when a man like you appears in a woman's vicinity, certain feelings arise which she can suppress, of course, but which I choose not to suppress."

"But before—you just laid there like some old sack of soybeans. You didn't act like you liked it one little bit."

Nella sat down on the sofa again and said, "I didn't dare let myself like it. I felt that I didn't deserve to enjoy it because of what I was going to do the minute you walked out the door."

"Call Farnsworth, you mean."

"Yes."

Pete slid over to her and put his hands on hers, which were folded in her lap. "Listen, you just did what you thought was right. The one thing shouldn't ought to have anything to do with the other. I'll tell you what really went wrong before. I didn't exactly come on gentle or considerate. I was mad like you said. It's no wonder you didn't enjoy it. Nobody could expect you to with a guy who's just horny and not giving no thought to the other person."

Nella freed her hand and slowly raised it until it rested against Pete's cheek. "It's still not too late," she said softly. "You can still leave. I'll give you some money."

"If I got a job somewhere here in the city, could we meet sometimes?"

"No."

"Why not? You just said—"

"Never mind what I said."

"I'll stick around, I guess."

"Oh, God!" Nella cried and pulled Pete toward her. "I want you to go, don't you understand? It's important to me—to both of us—that you go now."

Pete put his arms around her as she held him tightly, and he marveled at the way women could say one thing and do another, neither one making sense when you stacked them up side by side and compared them. Here she was holding on to him like she wasn't ever going to let him go and at the same time telling him to make tracks out of here. He couldn't figure her out, and he didn't much care that he couldn't so long as she was this close to him and her body was telling the truth, no matter what her words said.

"When this is all over," he told her gently, "maybe we can work something out between us."

She released him suddenly and drew away. "I don't love you."

"I know that. But it sure does seem like you could use somebody like me right now. It seems to me that you're scared of something, too. I know what it is I'm scared of

—that transplant business. But do you know what's got you so skittish?"

"I think I do."

"Maybe if you ever get around to telling me about it, I can help you figure out what to do about it."

"I doubt it."

Pete bent his head and kissed her. He felt her fingers on the back of his neck, and he moved closer to her. She was bent backward over the arm of the sofa, and her hands had enfolded his face. "The bedroom," he said when their kiss ended. "Come on."

Nella began to unbutton his shirt. He bent over to pull off his boots, and after he had removed them, he found that she had slipped out of her nightdress and was standing up. He started to rise, but she pushed him down onto the floor.

He managed to rid himself of his Levis and shorts, and then she was astride him, her hair hanging down to shroud his face. He raised himself on his elbows, kissed her, and then drew her down beside him. His thighs burned as her legs encircled them.

A long time later he felt her legs relax and then lower. He was about to withdraw from her, but she stiffened and kept her arms wrapped tightly around him. He remained joined to her, his cheek against hers for some time, and then he lifted his head and looked down at her and smiled. Maybe she didn't love him. But she sure must like him a lot. All he had to do was look at the way she was looking up at him and he could tell she did.

Tomorrow, although it was almost here, seemed to him to be a far distance away. As he lay with Nella, feeling her fingers sliding smoothly up and down his bare back, he exulted in the knowledge that he had been right all along, even though he hadn't had all that much experience with women. Her sap was definitely rising, and he was glad he had decided to stay, because she sure was turning out to be a tree worth tapping.

The idea embarrassed him. He shouldn't think of her

like that. She wasn't a tree. She was a human being the same as he was. He began to think of her as someone he had always hoped to meet, and now that he had met her in this deep and naked way, he was thrilled and happy, even if he didn't know her all that well as yet.

When at last she released him, they both rose and sat close together by the window, two strangers still, waiting for the dawn.

Chapter seven

Not long after dawn Dr. Sikorsky came into Pete's room, found him sprawled in sleep, and spoke his name.

Pete's awakening was a dark season in which strange seeds sprouted. It was a muted storm moving on to leave his clouded mental skies to clear slowly above the thick devastation of his ended dreams. He grunted and let go of the tail of some unknown desire he had been pursuing. He shook Sikorsky's hand from his shoulder and stuffed his face deeper into his pillow, only to find that he could not breathe in the new position, so he turned over but did not open his eyes. The events that had ended for him only an hour ago had left shreds of memories scattered and unorganized in his mind. He wanted to turn back to collect them, but Sikorsky was insisting from somewhere high above his head that he must get up. Today, didn't he remember, was the day.

Today was what day, and why the hell wouldn't they let him alone? All but Nella, of course. He didn't want her to let him alone. *Nella!* He basked in the recalled heat of her body and her face, a kaleidoscope of shadow and soft light, beaconed to him over the mountain of the pillow, beyond the white walls that he now could see through the open slits he had made of his eyes.

"Rise and shine, boy!" Sikorsky boomed. "Up and at 'em! Out of the bed and into the battle. Farnsworth's waiting for you. So is the whole staff, just about. The only one not there is God, but He couldn't get in because he forgot to make an appointment. Everybody makes an appointment to see the renowned James Farnsworth, God very definitely included!"

Nothing was making any sense. Pete wasn't sure if he believed in God, and he wished Sikorsky, bellering above him, would talk plain about something he could understand. He wished Sikorsky would talk about Nella. He remembered himself and her, joined at the hips and heaving heavenward. Oh, God, how she could screw when she put her heart into it! She couldn't have done any better if she really loved him, he was convinced.

"Pete, let's go. It's time." Sikorsky's voice was no longer bantering. Heavy in its seriousness now, it fell on Pete, and he shuddered under its weight.

"What time is it?"

Sikorsky glanced at his watch. "A few minutes before eight."

"I'll be there in a minute. Tell them I'll be there."

"Come on, Pete. Now!"

The day had come, bringing with it what? Clubs maybe. Bouquets. Pete wasn't yet ready to care. He pulled himself out of the bed and set it adrift, no longer a haven. A few minutes later, with his feet on the floor of the tile shore, he showered away the shared sweat of only hours ago, ate what was put in front of him in the cafeteria, and went, still rooted in sleep, down halls and through doors with Dr. Sikorsky chattering at his side to frighten away whatever dreams might remain to cloud his senses.

Nella was in the laboratory. She was the only one he noticed as he entered it. The others were all crowd faces, seen but not really noted. She was there, and she spoke to him, something about the morning being good, and he raised a hand and managed a smile and then sat down in a chair, feeling anchored and almost safe.

The morning suddenly speeded up. Cranked into action by many people moving about in the lab, it sped past Pete. He struggled to keep up with it and at last succeeded in doing so.

Sikorsky checked Pete's blood pressure and took his temperature. A nurse wrote something on a pad. Nella didn't do anything as far as Pete could see. Maybe she was just around to lend him moral support, something like that.

"Dr. Chapling," Farnsworth declared, "has been on the operating table since six o'clock this morning." He glanced at his watch. "We won't have to wait much longer, I expect."

"Who's operating?" Sikorsky asked.

"Weinstein," Farnsworth replied.

"*He* volunteered?"

"Of course. I wouldn't subject anyone to exposure unless they volunteered. The entire operating team volunteered."

"I thought Weinstein was married," Sikorsky persisted.

Farnsworth's face was bland. "Marriage is one thing. Science is another."

Sikorsky spread out his hands, conceding the point.

"How do you feel, Pete?" Farnsworth asked.

"I feel real fine."

Nella looked away as he glanced across at her.

"Is Chapling okay?" he asked.

Farnsworth shook his head. "His lymphatic flow is congealing rapidly. His skin—it's almost completely encrusted. Frankly, we're not sure he'll survive the operation."

"Just as well if he doesn't," Sikorsky suggested. "If he does, he'll be a moron or worse."

"Jim," someone said from the doorway.

Farnsworth turned. "Yes?"

"He didn't survive the operation," Dr. Weinstein said from the doorway.

"If you'll just lie down here," Farnsworth said to Pete, indicating the adjustable table nearby. "We're ready."

"You said it was just an injection, right?"

"That's what I said, and that's what it is."

"Hey!" Pete protested as Sikorsky began to unbutton his shirt. "Can't you give it to me in the arm?"

Nella stepped forward. "Dr. Farnsworth intends to follow the procedure used in the earlier experimental transfers. It has been established that an abdominal injection is most effective."

It wasn't what she said, Pete thought, not what she said at all, that made him relax. She could have just kept her

mouth shut, he realized. But she remembered that he was kind of scared, he guessed, so she'd stepped in and tried to explain things to him.

"Oh," he said and then blushed as Sikorsky undid his belt buckle and zipped down his fly.

The needle wasn't very long. It looked like just about every other needle Pete had ever seen on television shows and in the free clinics Inez used to take him to. Farnsworth was holding it. Pete felt his abdomen constrict as Sikorsky swabbed it with cotton saturated with alcohol. Farnsworth bent down.

He met Pete's eyes.

He hesitated only briefly, looked down at Pete's exposed abdomen, and lowered the needle.

Well, Pete told himself, it's too late now. He couldn't jump up, hanging on to his pants, with his belt buckle flapping and his fly wide open to the world and run hobbled down the hall and away. Last night was the time for running. But this was a new day, and decisions had been made and— But wait a minute. He still hadn't signed any paper. It seemed to him that some paper ought to have been signed to make the needle legal. Maybe papers didn't matter. Farnsworth would know, and he hadn't mentioned them. He'd told Farnsworth he'd go through with it, so who needed papers?

He and Nella hadn't signed any paper, and yet they had a contract, he guessed you could call it. Not all contracts were written down plain on paper for every busybody to take a good long gander at. Some things didn't need papers. Like the thing that was between him and Nella. Now that didn't require lawyers and judges to make it real. He knew that much for sure.

The stuff in the syringe had looked muddy. It had looked like the water you get from a well that hasn't been used in a long time. There looked to be things in it. Well, there were things in it. Fulton Chapling things. Out of Chapling's brain. Science sure did fool around with some weird things when you came right down to think about it. Take this brain transplant business, for instance. Take

pumps that made a man's heart keep going and were made out of—well, not out of skin and bone.

Nella? She was still there, looking like she'd had twelve hours of solid sleep. She didn't look like she'd spent half the night rolling around on the floor and taking her pleasure with him like he was the last man left on earth. Maybe she would—maybe tonight—after Farnsworth got through with him—

He didn't want to think it, but the thought came and had its way with him. What would somebody as smart as Nella want with him? She should want somebody—somebody like Farnsworth—who could talk about things they both understood. About books they'd both read and what the United Nations was doing. Important things that needed some pretty big words to pin down. But never mind, because even if Nella did know how to string the big words together, she sure didn't use them last night. Love didn't have to do with things like books or politics. Why, any man or woman who had any sense at all could tell you that! Mitzie, for example, now she could have told anybody who happened to ask her *that*. No, Nella and him, they had it between them, and it was real, and her being so smart didn't make no difference at all. The two of them, they were down to basics already, to the one thing that really mattered.

"You can sit up now," Farnsworth said, the words barely escaping from between his thin lips as he stepped away from the table on which Pete was lying. "Stefan, you better brief him."

"You can expect to feel some slight nausea fairly soon, Pete," Sikorsky said. "But it will disappear within an hour or so."

"Why should I get sick?"

"It's nothing to worry about. It's merely a temporary reaction. Come to my office in an hour and I'll give you additional details on what you can expect as a result of the transfer."

"Okay," Pete said as he zipped up his fly and buckled his belt. "You know, I don't feel any different."

"You will," Sikorsky said. "Soon you'll—"

"Stefan," Farnsworth interrupted. "Clean up here and then see to it that our recording equipment is in order. Once the transfer has been fully assimilated, we'll have Pete begin transmitting information to us."

Only Nella and a nurse remained after the others had left. Pete crossed to Nella, who was putting some papers in a briefcase, and whispered, "That's that."

"Yes." she said, "that's that."

"You going my way by any chance?"

She accompanied him down the corridor. When they reached the elevator, she looked up at him and said, "I have to leave you here, Pete. Dr. Farnsworth has some notes he wants transcribed. Remember, if anything unusual occurs, all you have to do is contact him on the intercom."

"Hey, don't look like you're going to a funeral or something. Or are you jealous of me? Is that why you look so funny? Because all you got is your own brain? I've heard it said here and there that two heads are better than one." He laughed without real joy.

Nella entered the elevator. She didn't look back.

Ten minutes before the hour was up, Pete entered Sikorsky's rather shabby office.

"You're early," Sikorsky noted. "But sit down. Relax."

Pete sat down and crossed his legs. He had a disconcerting suspicion that he was immune to the transfer as well as to Virus Y because whatever was supposed to happen to him hadn't, so far as he could tell. The only thing that had happened which Sikorsky had predicted was the nausea he'd had for ten minutes or so. But that had passed. And then he had spent the time before coming to Sikorsky's office looking through a magazine in his room and hoping someone would come in so he could talk to them, but no one had.

"Let's begin at the beginning," Sikorsky said. "Ready?"

"Shoot."

"Professor Shimizu began experimenting with rats," Sikorsky explained. "He went on to dogs and eventually to

human beings. The human beings he used were volunteers from among the prisoners at San Quentin. He didn't get very far with that program, however. Funding was eliminated by both the federal and state governments in a budget squeeze before he'd barely begun. So you are really the first person to get the degree of dosage that Shimizu had intended working up to gradually with the men at the prison."

"That's a new one for me."

"What is?"

Pete grinned. "Being first. Being at the head of the line."

Sikorsky didn't smile, so Pete assumed a more serious expression. "Doc, what's supposed to happen to me now? Am I supposed to turn into a genius or something?"

"Perhaps the best way to answer your question is to give you a brief description of Professor Shimizu's research in the area of applied psychology. He'd done a great deal of work on the learning process—how learning takes place, what physical and emotional factors impede it, how it might possibly be accelerated. But he was a bit of an innovator, and he was soon working on something a little more avant garde than the standard learning-process analysis. He reasoned, according to his published papers, that if learning was—and he had proved this experimentally—a matter of data storage in the molecules of the brain, why, then it should be logically possible to transfer that data from one person to another by transferring the molecules containing the data.

"In the beginning, I should tell you, his work was viewed as rather eccentric. But it quickly gained professional acceptance as a result of his rather dramatic demonstrations. Now, back to the rats. Bear in mind that rats naturally prefer darkness. So Shimizu set up two boxes. One was completely dark, the other brightly lighted. He connected wires to the darkened box, and every time one of his rats went into the box, it received an electric shock."

"I bet those rats got to hate him."

"In time," Sikorsky continued, "the rats learned to avoid the dark box. They came to prefer the lighted box.

Now another group of rats—the control group—were allowed to enter the dark box without receiving shocks. Shimizu then destroyed the first group and injected molecular matter taken from their brains into the brains of half of the control group. That half, the one that had received the brain extracts, immediately preferred the lighted box to the dark one. The remaining members of the control group continued to express their natural preference for the dark box. Thus, Professor Shimizu had clearly demonstrated the validity of his theory that learning could be transferred chemically."

"But," Pete said, "couldn't it be that those rats that got the brains of the dead ones—couldn't it be that they just chose the lighted box by accident?"

"Good question," Sikorsky stated, observing Pete closely. "But no, it was established that the probability of the endowed rats choosing the lighted box by chance was less than one in five thousand."

"Shimizu determined that by statistical analysis?"

Sikorsky's eyes widened. "You've studied statistical analysis?"

"No, I never studied that subject. As a matter of fact, I never even heard of it until it just popped out on me."

"The transfer is taking effect," Sikorsky observed flatly. "Pretty soon you'll be hearing a lot of things you never heard before."

Pete shook his head in amazement as he began to understand what was happening to him. "Well, I'll be damned!"

"Let me ask you a question or two, Pete."

"Go ahead."

"Who was the author of *Das Kapital?*"

"Somebody named—uh, Max. No, that's not right, is it? Wait a minute now. I've almost got it. Marx. Karl Marx. That's right, isn't it? Sure, it is. I *know* it is."

"Do you know what an isotope is?"

"An isobar is—"

"Not isobar, Iso*tope*."

"Sorry, I got confused there for a minute. Isotope.

Okay. An isotope is any of two or more forms of an element which have the same or quite closely related properties. They also have the same atomic number but different atomic weights. Uranium isotopes, for example, are U 235, U 238 and —"

"By God, it worked!" Sikorsky exclaimed, getting to his feet.

Pete remained seated. "Doc," he asked, "did you know Chapling very well?"

"Not at all. Why?"

Pete began to laugh. "I'll tell you a little secret about Chapling. His middle name was Pomeroy."

"I didn't even know he had a middle name."

"He never let on. Hated the name, he did."

"How do you know?"

"I guess I got more than just his scientific knowledge," Pete answered, tapping his temple with one finger.

"Can you describe what you are experiencing, Pete?"

"It's rather like a pulse," Pete replied. "It comes and goes. Sometimes it's clear, and sometimes it's a bit vague." He paused a moment. "It's pretty hard to tell when the toad is going to hop and harder still to tell which way."

"One minute you sound like Chapling and the next like yourself," Sikorsky observed thoughtfully. "Your tone of voice changes. So does your language, your choice of words. I'll let Farnsworth know how you're doing and then set up a schedule for the recording of Chapling's data. It would be a good idea, I think, if you made an effort to control the flow of thought so that we won't waste time, Pete. Better that we know which way the toad is going to hop than to have to chase him all over creation once he does."

"Doc," Pete said, "why do you let Farnsworth treat you like he does? He treats you like dirt."

Sikorsky's face grew crimson.

Before he could respond to the question, Pete said, "I'm sorry, Doc. The thought just popped into my head. I never even thought that before. But—but I guess maybe Chapling did, huh?"

"I suppose he did," Sikorsky replied stiffly. "That will be all for now."

Pete left the office.

Back in his room Pete flopped on the bed and opened a copy of *Life* that was lying among some other magazines that someone had thoughtfully stacked on his night table.

He looked at the cars advertised. He skipped the editorial page. But he did notice the black-bordered box which said that the blank pages in the magazine and the blurred ink resulted from an attack "by crazed sufferers from Virus Y" who had set fire to the printing plant, claiming later, according to witnesses, that the plant was the "sewer from which all pro-Communist propaganda poured forth to pollute the world."

There were almost as many blank pages as there were ones with pictures on them. Pete glanced from picture to picture. There was a wolf cub that somebody in Wyoming was raising. It showed the lady who had found the animal feeding it with a baby bottle. The wolf had milk all over its muzzle. Pete liked the pictures. They were of soldiers receiving guerilla training, of the marriage of the Vice-President's son—but that one was so blurred you couldn't hardly tell if there was a minister around. There was a picture of fallen houses and half-buried bodies. Something about the San Andreas Fault in California.

Gradually, without quite realizing it, Pete found himself becoming bored with the wolf cub and the soldiers with their fingers forming Vs. He found himself reading more of the words beneath the pictures than he generally did. Of course, the pictures didn't really need any words. That was the whole point of the magazine. It *showed* you life; it didn't write a whole lot of words about it. But it was strange, he thought. He wanted to know more about what the pictures showed. Why did the San Andreas Fault keep causing earthquakes? Was it true that the United States would never be the first to use the nuclear bomb as officials had claimed?

Drivel.

The word whispered in his mind. It wasn't his word. He

didn't even know what it meant. Yes, he did know what it meant. That is, Fulton Chapling had known what it meant.

He put down the magazine and thought about what had just happened, thought about unfamiliar words popping into his head and about how superior he was beginning to feel to the people who read *Life* and liked it. His feeling of superiority increased and with it came another feeling. He began to feel important. If it wasn't for him, after all, Chapling would really have died.

He tried an experiment. He tried not to think. That is, he tried not to think Pete Bratton type thoughts about wolf cubs being cute and what it would be like to fuck Miss Universe.

"Chapling," Pete called out in the quiet of his mind. "Hey, man, come on out, wherever you are."

Images at first, clouded but unclear. Women who were older than Pete liked them but who liked to do it despite their age. He suddenly shuddered at the sight of a tiny, twisted body without any orifices that someone was holding in trembling rubber-gloved hands . . .

His daughter. No, Chapling's dead daughter. He pushed the image aside. It was replaced with an idea. At first Pete wasn't sure what the idea was, and then he recognized it as having to do with power. He thought of cars that could travel one hundred and more miles an hour. He thought of knives that could cut flesh, not to kill, but to cure. The idea was invigorating, and Pete reveled in it. He felt strong and sure of himself, and he liked the way people spoke his name, almost as if they were in church, and the way he only had to ask for something, and somebody right away went and got it . . .

"Yes, Dr. Chapling, right away, sir."

"How do you do, Dr. Chapling!"

Pete's eyes focused and he sat up. That Chapling had sure had it made! At least, he did when he was still alive. Wow, wouldn't it be something to be able to tell people what to do and when and give them a quick kick in the ass if they didn't move smart and snappy the way Chapling had done! It would be lots better, Pete could tell anyone

who cared, than being Bozo in a carnival or even riding Bella out under the Colorado stars and smelling the sweetness of the spruce she crushed under her hooves.

And those women, never mind how old they were. The things Chapling had made them do! Weird things, all right, no doubt about that. But maybe worth a try sometime . . .

Pete realized he'd gotten more than he had ever expected to get. He paused for a moment, suddenly concerned, and let his own thoughts subside. It was okay. Chapling's technical knowledge was there, too. He'd touched on something about cytology and how genes transmit their messages to parts of the cytoplasm, which then produce certain kinds of cell proteins, depending upon the content of . . . It was okay.

The facts were there so Farnsworth and Sikorsky wouldn't be disappointed. The other stuff, well, they wouldn't be interested in any of that. But Pete was. The science he didn't understand, but any fool could understand what Chapling had made that woman with the blue hair do to him in that hotel room in Miami last year. Pete knew he never would of thought of that particular position in a million years. And even if he had, he wouldn't have practiced it. Not him. It was—obscene.

He found himself thinking of Nella. He decided to call her on the intercom. He laughed softly to himself as he pressed the switch. He was the one who had decided to call her, but Chapling's thoughts were mixed up in his decision, he was fairly sure. Well, it didn't make any difference which player on a team scored a goal, did it?

When he got through to her, he said, "Nella?"

"Yes. Who is this please?"

Pete grinned at himself in the mirror of the medicine cabinet visible through the open bathroom door. Solemnly, he said, "Miss Carlisle, this is Dr. Fulton Chapling speaking. I—"

Her gasp was audible, but Pete ignored it, intending to make the most of this joke. "I'm told, Miss Carlisle, that you work for Dr. Farnsworth. But I have a proposition for you. It seems that I'm at loose ends at the moment—with-

out a secretary, you see, and I'm not a man who prospers psychologically without female companionship. Therefore, I'd like to suggest that you and I—"

"Stop it! Pete, stop it!"

"Don't interrupt me, Miss Carlisle. I'm not accustomed to being interrupted."

"Pete, it's you, isn't it?"

"Never mind this Pete person, whoever he is, and pay attention to me, Please. Now the arrangement I'm offering carries with it certain, shall we say, nonscientific duties which my observations tell me you are very well-equipped to perform. Now then, Miss Carlisle, when can we meet to finalize the matter?"

Nella gave a moan that stimulated something in Pete. "Hey!" he yelled into the intercom. "That was a pretty good imitation, huh? If you didn't know the guy was dead—"

"Pete, what do you want?"

"Nothing. Just to talk to you."

"I'm really quite busy at the moment. We can talk later."

"You sound to me like you're standing in a bucketful of ice cubes. You don't have no regrets, do you? About last night, I mean?"

"Don't ever do that again, Pete."

"What I did last night?"

"No. I mean pretend to be Fulton Chapling. It's—it's very disturbing. Even your voice sounded very much like his."

"Spooks you, doesn't it? Can't say as I blame you for feeling spooked. How'd you like to be me? It's like I rented my head to someone else part time, and already he acts like he owns the whole place."

"I wouldn't like to be you," Nella said seriously. "The transfer, I gather, was successful?"

"Sikorsky says so. The little guy practically danced on his desk when Chapling's ideas started coming through. He and Farnsworth are going to start taking down what Chapling had on his mind pretty soon. Today, maybe. Listen, Nella, can I come up to your place tonight?

"I'll let you know."

"When?"

"When I've—I'll let you know. You're all right, aren't you, Pete?"

"Young woman, I'm perfectly all right with the possible exception of the fact that I might improve upon that present perfection if we were to come to a mutually agreeable arrangement."

The line, he realized, was dead. He sat for a moment, a frown on his face. "Chapling," he muttered out loud, "mind your own goddam business! You got that? Nella's *my* business!"

Chapter eight

Pete paused for breath and looked up at the clock. Almost midnight. Sikorsky had started the recording session, Christ, how many years ago? Only this afternoon. Only about ten hours ago. He turned to Nella, who had switched off the recorder when he had stopped spouting Chapling's formulas and theories. She looked beat to him but still beautiful.

"I could do with a bit of brandy," he heard himself say in the new voice that sounded only vaguely like his own. At times he wished he had never heard it in that locked room only days ago before Chapling had died.

Attendants and nurses bustled about, bumped into one another in their haste to please not Pete but Chapling, made calls to the cafeteria and the supply room. No one had remembered that Chapling always drank brandy when under stress. It was one of the colorful elements that had lent his legend a quaint charm among his former colleagues.

"Forget it," Pete said finally. "Bring me a cold beer."

Someone did a few minutes later, and he drank it thirstily, barely pausing for breath. When the bottle was almost empty, he patted his stomach and belched loudly. "Beer," he said apologetically, "always gives me gas."

"Continue," Farnsworth said impatiently.

Pete didn't want to go on and he was about to say so when something stopped him. He resisted at first but soon found that his resistance was useless.

"So, gentlemen," he said, closing his eyes. "Where were we? Ah, yes, I remember. The muton, then, holds the key to preventing organismic errors in the developing fetus.

Chemical or electrical alteration of the muton—of even a *single* muton—can cause serious mutations during the fetal developmental process. Now I have done some work in this area, as you know. Suppose, gentlemen, that the total chemical climate of the entire group of mutons could be controlled to prevent any possible aberrant development. Suppose further that it were possible to control the status of deoxyribonucleic acid completely by electrochemical maintenance of a constant invariable climate in which—"

He droned on.

Nella adjusted the volume on the recorder, glanced at the clock and then at Farnsworth.

"... it may therefore be necessary to develop fetuses outside the womb. Whether within or without, however, is not the primary issue. To optimize the chances of mutation avoidance regardless of the developmental milieu, we must properly purify and skillfully use both enzymes and catalytic systems. Extraneous material in an enzyme can confuse it and thereby render it inactive, so that—"

The door suddenly opened, and Sikorsky came into the room—"Still burning the midnight oil, I see," he declared. He walked to the center of the room with a stiff precision that brought a quick frown to Farnsworth's face.

"Quiet!" Farnsworth ordered. "The recorder's on."

Sikorsky ignored him. "Pete looks exhausted to me. If you ask me, his body is going to give out before his brain does. Why don't you give the poor bastard a break, Farnsworth?"

"Nella!" Farnsworth snapped and gestured in her direction.

In response to his gesture she turned off the tape recorder.

"Doctor," Farnsworth said tensely, addressing Sikorsky, "I suggest you let us finish our work."

"A trained seal, that's what he is," Sikorsky said, waving a hand at Pete. "No, maybe he's not a seal at all." He stroked his chin in a parody of someone in deep thought, and then he shook a finger at Farnsworth. "He might not be a seal at all. You might have got your hands on a tiger

instead, Jim. You'd better watch it, or those newspaper stories you're counting on might turn out to be obituaries. Tigers can't be trusted."

Pete heard the words, but he couldn't follow the reasoning. His mind was awash in a series of buffeting waves that came from outside—Sikorsky's harangue—and within as well—Chapling's boiling thoughts about biogenetic engineering.

"Get out!" Farnsworth shouted.

Sikorsky started for the door, but suddenly he stopped and looked back. "You don't give a damn for him," he accused Farnsworth, pointing at Pete. "You don't give a damn for anybody. That's your armor against the world, Farnsworth. That's what keeps you so safe and antiseptic. But some of us aren't so lucky. Some of us—" he glanced at Nella "—care too much about other people and what happens to them."

"That's enough!" Farnsworth barked. "Go back to your office and pack up all your empty bottles and then get out of here. I want you out of the building immediately."

Sikorsky stiffened. "Jim—tonight?"

"Tonight. You are endangering the security of operations here at the Center. Nella will testify to that fact."

Sikorsky's mouth worked, but no words emerged. After a moment he managed to mutter, "I haven't any place to go. No other job—"

"You'll not get another easily," Farnsworth said. "Not many places welcome drunken doctors."

"Jim, please. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said what I did. It's just that—we're all working pretty hard. It was just a joke, Jim. Look, let me stay. I promise I won't make any more trouble. Jim?"

Farnsworth studied Sikorsky, his lips a thin line in a face hard with hatred. "I suppose I can use you. We're understaffed enough as it is."

"Is there anything—can I get you anything, Jim? That tape reel's almost finished. I could get— a cup of coffee?"

"Gentlemen, please!" Pete interrupted. "Shall we continue without anymore wrangling?"

"It's after midnight, Jim," Nella said quickly.

"Tomorrow's another day, Pete," Farnsworth said with some reluctance. "We'll continue first thing in the morning. Nella, remove that tape and file it. Label it carefully so that we'll be able to maintain a clear sequence."

Farnsworth left the room, followed by Sikorsky. Nella removed the tape and labeled it.

Pete raised his arms and stretched. He stood up and stretched a second time. "You look tired," he told Nella.

"So do you."

He nodded, and they made their way to the elevator. Nella said nothing when Pete did not get off at his floor. Once inside her apartment she asked him if he wanted another bottle of beer.

"No," he said. "I don't want anything to drink."

Something about the tone of his voice caused her to turn toward him.

"Can I stay here with you tonight?" he asked her.

"You need sleep more than you need sex," she answered.

"I meant stay to sleep. Honest, that's all I meant."

"I was only thinking about your own best interests. I do think you'd sleep better in your own room. There would be no distractions there."

"I sure would rather stay here with somebody who keeps thinking all the time about my own best interests."

Nella couldn't help herself; she laughed and, despite the fatigue that paled her face, looked for a moment as if she hadn't spent more than eleven hours in the laboratory. "I've only one bed, as you know," she said slyly, "and they say three's a crowd."

"There's just the two of us." Pete had barely completed his statement when he realized it was incorrect. There was a third person present or the ghost of a third person. No, not that. It wasn't as if Fulton Chapling were an actual third person you could reach out and touch. He's more like my partner, Pete thought. Or maybe I'm his.

"I'm beat. Let's go to bed, okay?"

When they were lying side by side in Nella's bed, neither of them able to sleep, Nella asked, "What's it like?"

Pete knew instantly what she meant. "It's hard to explain. It's like being part of a two-man team. It's like having something extra going for you."

"An extra dimension," Nella mused.

"Sometimes though, I'm not sure where he stops and where I start."

"It won't last much longer. It will be over soon."

"Over," Pete repeated. "Then what, I wonder?" He proceeded to answer his own question. "Then I'll take off and scout around and find myself some kind of job somewhere and—" He stopped, sighed.

"What is it? What's the matter?"

"It'll be the same thing all over again. You know, the trouble with me is I don't seem able to make plans for myself. Lots of mornings I used to get up, and I'd say to myself, 'Pete,' I'd say, 'you got to get yourself some kind of definite goddam plan to your life. You got to get organized.' Sometimes I'd think maybe I ought to take some of those correspondence courses they have. I seen an ad for them in a magazine—they got hundreds of courses. They can teach you to be an accountant or even a stockbroker in your spare time. But I don't know. I just never seem to be able to get going on any kind of permanent plan. And you know something? Me taking a correspondence course—now there's one real big joke."

"Why is it a joke?"

Pete propped himself up on one elbow and looked down at Nella in surprise. "I don't stay in any one place long enough for the mailman to catch up with me. Even if I got the first lesson, the rest of them would never get to me because I'd probably have already moved on somewhere else. I told you before I never have found no place I ever seemed meant to actually stay in. Don't you remember?"

"I remember."

"The trouble with me is things just sort of happen to me. I guess I never picked up the knack of fixing things so that they don't just happen but were intended. By me, I mean."

Nella reached for her package of cigarettes on the night table. She lit one and inhaled. "Things happen to all of us. There's nothing unusual about that."

"Don't get me wrong," Pete said quickly. "I'm not feeling sorry for myself or anything like that. The way I see it is if you're going to do whatever you feel like doing, well, you got to be ready to take whatever comes. For a person like me that's just the way it is. It can be good that way sometimes. Lots of times, as a matter of fact. Like at the carnival. I liked being at the carnival."

"Carnivals are exciting. Magical."

"You know what? You're right. Carnivals—they're like a second chance to feel like a kid again. I don't think most people who work at carnivals do it for the money. I mean not *just* for the money. People work in them because carnivals are—for kids. Kids, they live sort of slow through the days and the weeks as if they had all the time in the world. Especially in summer when there's swimming and the air is warm and the days stretch farther. When you're a kid, you get up in the morning, and you say, 'I wonder what's going to happen today.' Now in the carnival, it's a lot like that. But instead of moving from day to day, you move from town to town. There's no end to all the towns, you think, just the way a kid thinks that summer isn't ever going to turn into September and he'll have to go back to school."

"And there will be clocks and bells and books to read in a specified time."

"That's right!" Pete cried. "That is one hundred percent right! Once I went two whole days without looking at a clock. I did it on purpose. I ate when I was hungry, and I slept when I got tired, and boy, did I feel good! I felt so free, you just wouldn't believe."

"But September came."

Pete flopped down on his back. "Yeah, it did. You can stop looking at clocks for a while if you want to, but sooner or later you're going to have to look. You *have* to look because everybody else is looking and winding their watches, and if you don't look you can't keep up, and you get left out of things."

"There's one flaw in your reasoning, if I may say so."

"What?"

"Fulton Chapling wasn't restricted by time."

"Oh, yeah, I see what you mean. He had himself a time to die, only he didn't."

"I wish he did die," Nella said harshly.

"Hey, what did you have against the guy?"

"You don't understand. I had nothing against Dr. Chapling. It isn't that exactly."

"Then what is it exactly?"

"It's what he's doing to you. I spent a long time in the laboratory today listening to you—to him—and at times I almost forgot that you were there. In a way, you weren't. Oh, I shouldn't be talking like this. I have responsibilities—my work. But the whole thing seems unnatural."

"You scientists do a lot of things that some people could call unnatural. You give dogs diseases while you're trying to find out how to keep people from getting sick. That don't seem entirely natural to me. So why should what they did to me bother you?"

"I wonder where he is now," Nella mused, not bothering to answer Pete's question.

"Why, he's here," Pete responded, surprised. "He's here because I am."

"You see!" Nella cried. "You talk about Chapling as if he were still alive!"

"Well, in a way he is, you got to admit."

Nella turned over on her side. "I don't want to talk anymore."

Pete knew that she was tired, and he knew that when a woman got tired, she let her tongue loose to say things she really didn't mean. Better, he thought, to let her sleep now. He lay there in the dark room and listened to the silence. It said that being here with Nella was good. It was like belonging, and he was pretty sure by now that belonging meant a whole lot more than just having a place to be permanent in. It meant—it meant belonging to some*one*. Like having someone worry when you didn't come around for a while because a car might have hit you. It meant things like starting to say something and not having

to finish it, because right in the middle the other person said, yeah, they knew exactly what you meant. Belonging to someone might not seem so, but Pete believed, as he lay beside the only woman he'd ever gone to bed with just to be near, that if you wanted to belong, you had to open up all your gates and let some other person come on inside and see how you lived deep down all by yourself where it was private. And then the other person would open her gates, and you'd go on in and say how nice everything was and thank you very much for inviting me because it really was lowdown out there all alone without nobody knowing my name or noticing me much.

At last he slept. But the voices that later intruded on his consciousness came not from any dream but from a place much more ordinary—from Nella's living room. He tried to shut them out, but he failed to do so. The man's voice got louder, and then the woman said something angry, and he was awake.

"Nella," he said, reaching out for her. "Gone," he told the darkness. "Now where—?"

In the living room, that's where. The woman in there, he realized, was her, was Nella, and she was trying to quiet somebody down but the guy, whoever he was, wouldn't take quieting.

He'd better get up, he decided, and see if Nella was okay. He threw his legs over the side of the bed and sat up. But he couldn't go meandering in there without any clothes on. The thought occurred to him that maybe he shouldn't go meandering in there at all, considering the fact that whoever it was in there—Nella might not want him knowing she had company. He sat there on the bed, debating, as the voices continued, and the man muttered, "A sonofabitch, that's what Farnsworth is."

Pete got up and pulled on his pants. At the bedroom door he paused. He could hear them plain, almost as if they were with him in the bedroom, even though the door was shut. He recognized the man's voice. Sikorsky. Now what was Sikorsky calling Farnsworth a sonofabitch for in the middle of the night?

"Stefan, please. Go back to bed." That was Nella.

"Haven't been to bed. Been to the bottle." Sikorsky.

"Stefan, I told you Pete's in the bedroom, and he needs his sleep."

"Call him out here. I want to discush—t' discuss something of vital importance to his future health and happiness."

"No."

"Nella, my dear, I know what I'm doing."

"Please, Stefan."

"Hi, Doc," Pete said as he entered the room. "What's got you so riled up?"

"Our hero!" Sikorsky bellowed, raising a hand to his forehead in a clumsy salute and beginning to totter.

Pete was across the room in an instant. He caught Sikorsky and helped him into a chair.

Sikorsky glared up at him. "You get old, and even somebody breathin' hard'll blow you over."

Pete turned to Nella. "You okay?"

"Yes. Dr. Sikorsky just stopped by to— He's leaving now. Go back to bed, Pete."

"I'm not leaving," Sikorsky snarled. "Si' down, Pete."

"You ought to give yourself some sack time, Doc," Pete said. "You look like you're carrying a heavy load, that's for sure."

Sikorsky sat slouched in the chair like an iceberg under a sudden sun. He seemed about to melt and slide out of the chair.

"I'm guilty of collushion," he murmured.

Pete scratched his head. "I don't get you, Doc. The things that go on around here are a whole lot too much for me."

"Too much for me, too," Sikorsky muttered, and his head fell to one side.

"Go back to bed, Pete," Nella said, taking his arm.

Sikorsky opened an eye. "Where'm I?" He pulled himself into a partially upright position and fixed his one, fully opened eye on Nella. "Tell him, Nella."

"Tell me what?" Pete asked.

"Farnsworth's got plans f'r you," Sikorsky replied. "He's going to drive you more out of your mind than you

are already. He's got the next charity case all lined up. Fellow name of Brian Moriarity. Ever heard o' him?"

Nella groaned her distress and went over to the sofa and sat down. She crossed her arms on the back of the sofa and placed her head on them, hiding her face.

"You talking to me?" Pete asked, staring at Sikorsky.

"Who d'ja think I was talking to? Chapling?"

Pete didn't like the way things were going. He wasn't sure where they were going, but he had a bad feeling that wherever it was, it wasn't going to turn out to be such a great place.

"Brian Moriarity," Sikorsky said, his lips oozing the voweled syllables of the last name. "He writes books. Wins awards for 'em. So, tell Chapling to move over, Pete. Moriarity's moving in on him first thing in the morning!"

"I thought it was only supposed to be Chapling's brain—" Pete halted.

"What makes you think only one mouse deserves the cheese? The news is out about you, Pete. Farnsworth saw to that for reasons of his own. There's even a congresh'nal committee set up to screen applicants."

Nella lifted her head and shock showed on her face. "You only told me about Moriarity a moment ago, Stefan. You mean there are to be others?"

Sikorsky's cheeks had inflated, and Pete realized he was holding his breath.

"Hiccups coming on," Sikorsky said seconds later after expelling a gust of alcoholic air. "Hold your breath, count t' ten. Nips 'em in the bud. Sure, there'r others. Vernon Rogerson, the physicist, t' name just one. Congresh has already approved his credentials, which just goes to prove that even Congresh can act expedi— expe— fast when it wants to."

"Nella," Pete said, turning to her. "Did you know about what they're fixing to do?"

She shook her head. "No, I didn't. I thought Chapling was the only one. Dr. Farnsworth said nothing to me about any others."

Pete didn't think she looked like she was lying. If any-

thing, she looked mad. He supposed she felt left out, not having been told the whole story about what was going on.

"How many others are there?" Nella asked Sikorsky.

Sikorsky closed his eyes. His lips opened slightly, and tiny bubbles of saliva escaped to froth on his stubbled chin.

"Stefan! Answer me!"

"Don't know. Heard Jim talking on the phone t' somebody. Others is all I know."

"Well," Pete declared, "the least he could have done is asked me if I minded. It seems to me he should have done that at least."

"Tell him t' go t' hell," Sikorsky whispered drowsily. "Your brain is your own private property. A man's mind is his castle. Ought to be anyway."

Nella looked from Sikorsky to Pete.

He knew she was waiting to hear what he was going to say about this new twist in the road he was traveling down so fast. But what could he say? It didn't make sense for him to let them help Chapling out and then for him to say, "Okay, one's the limit." But, hell, he could spend the rest of his natural life here if they kept coming up with more people sick with Virus Y who wanted to go on living in this weird way. Maybe now was the time to call a halt before one steer turned into a whole herd.

"Somebody gi' me a hand," Sikorsky muttered.

Pete went over and helped him to his feet.

Nella got up and came over to them. "Stefan, it's wrong. You know it's wrong. You said as much yourself. Can't you stop him?"

"Stop Farnsworth?" Sikorsky gave an abortive giggle. "Easier to stop an epidemic. No, Nella, my dear, not only can I not stop him, but I won't try to. I want to stay here. I'm an old man, Nella, and old men are not a very valuable commodity in any market that I know of. What else can I do? Go out on the streets and catch Virus Y?" He looked down at his hands, moving in agitation as if of their own volition. "That might not be such a bad idea."

"Stefan!"

"Oh, I won't do it. I wouldn't—did you know that the National Guard is patrolling the streets? They've been ordered to shoot to kill looters. You ask me, that's a smokescreen. The soldiers are shooting the sick. Did you know that? It's prob'ly government policy. No, I'll stay here and drink and let Jim punish me for my overindulgence, and I'll hold the syringes full of brain extract for him and I'll—"

"You'll shine his shoes and smile and shuffle!" Nella interrupted, bitterness darkening her tone.

"Yes, my dear," Sikorsky said wearily. "I'll shine his shoes and smile and shuffle. Please—don't say anymore. I know too much about myself as it is."

Nella turned away and covered her face with her hands.

"Goodnight, Nella," Sikorsky said, his eyes glistening, his voice barely audible. And then with an attempt at gaiety he added, "You too, Chapling."

As if the door slamming behind Sikorsky were a signal, Nella returned to the bedroom.

Pete followed her. He was wide awake now, and as he lay down beside her, desire suddenly surged within him. He turned on his side, propped his head up on one hand, and stared down at Nella who was lying on her back with her eyes closed.

"Should I let them do it to me?" he asked her.

She made an angry sound and turned away from him.

Pete understood. It wasn't really any of her business what he did. What he did was strictly his business. He had no right to go around asking strangers what they thought he should do.

"What are you going to do?" she asked him, her eyes still closed in the face she had turned away from him.

His eyebrows lifted, lowered. "Well, I can't say for sure. But knowing all the things that Chapling knew—it's like getting a free education."

Nella opened her eyes and looked up at him. "Why do you need to know about the chemical composition of the cell? What good will it do you to know how to synthesize DNA?"

Pete tried a smile. "Well, it might come in handy sometime."

"You already know the important things. You know how to care about other people. That's a very important thing to know."

"Everybody knows that."

"No," Nella contradicted, her voice distant. "Not everybody knows how to do that, and those who do know often deliberately suppress their knowledge. Or else they use it to make people do what they want—to make them prisoners of a sort. With you—it's very different with you. You do the right thing, the kind thing, without stopping to think. It comes naturally to you."

"Listen, I'm no saint. I done things that I'm ashamed of. Lots of things."

"That may be. A person is not totally good or evil. What is important is which factor is dominant. With you it's love."

Pete flushed. He always felt uncomfortable when people started talking about love. It left him feeling out of his depth. He knew what love was. He had felt it lots of times for all kinds of people, but he just didn't like to talk about it or have someone talk to him about it. Why couldn't people just let themselves feel it and never mind analyzing it all the time?

"How many people helped you take care of Mitzi when she was sick, Pete?"

Nella had taken him by surprise. He had almost completely forgotten about Mitzi. Hearing her name now, he remembered her last days and answered Nella's question. "There was only me there at the end."

"That is precisely what I mean," Nella said and closed her eyes again.

"But she had the sickness. Everybody was scared stiff they'd catch it from her, so they didn't dare go near her."

"Weren't you scared?"

Had he been afraid of catching Virus Y from Mitzi? "To tell you the truth, I didn't stop to think about what could happen. She kept calling, and so I went to see what

she wanted. We were pretty good friends, like I told you. I guess I didn't think much about maybe catching the sickness from her."

Nella, without opening her eyes, reached up and put her hands on Pete's face. She drew him down to her and with her eyes still closed kissed him tenderly. "I love you, Pete."

Her words stunned him. He broke away from her and raised his head. She was looking at him now. She loved him? That wasn't possible! No one except Inez had ever told him they loved him. He realized with something like shock that he had stopped expecting to hear someone say those words to him. But now the words had been said by this girl, who was the most unlikely person in the whole world to say them to a person like he was. He was stunned.

He lay down on his back and gave a broken laugh. "You sure took me by surprise," he said. "I wasn't expecting nothing like this to happen to me."

"Don't take what I said too seriously. There are all kinds of levels of love, and not every kind leads to marriage and babies. So don't misinterpret what I said."

"I'm glad you told me how you feel," Pete said, measuring out his words carefully, trying desperately to make them convey exactly what he was feeling at the moment. "To have somebody like you say something like that to somebody like me—I just never expected it is all. What I mean is, as far as I'm concerned, I just had no notion other than to screw you last night and let it go at that. Love didn't figure in it at all for me at the time. But then— I wasn't about to say anything because I thought I understood how you wanted it to be between us but now— I guess I love you too, Nella."

He took her in his arms and held her close to him. But there was one more thing that he had to say to her so she would be sure to understand him. "I know you've got your career and all, so I want you to know that you don't have to feel like you signed on for life with me or nothing like that. I'm just real glad things are the way they are between us, at least for now."

What was that noise she made? She sounded like she had a frog or two in her throat.

Hey there, you big stupid stud, Pete told himself silently. It sure does look like love has finally caught up with you. And love, you got to remember, is something a hell-uva lot more serious than sex. Not that he was knocking sex. He wasn't. It was great. But this—this reminded him of the time he'd found the Secret Code Signal Ring inside the box of cereal he'd talked Inez into buying for him. There was the ring way down at the bottom! He'd gotten prizes before in other boxes of cereal, and they were all okay, but all along the only thing he'd really wanted was a Secret Code Signal Ring, and by damn, he'd finally gotten it! The best part of all was that the ring turned out to be just as wonderful as he had imagined it would be all along.

He was about to tell Nella a second time that he loved her. He wanted to hear himself say the words, those wonderful words that he'd heard lots of famous people saying to each other all the time in the movies and on the TV.

But something subtle intervened. It still had to do with love, that tortured something that had seized him dimly, distantly. He raised his hand and brought it down on Nella's bare breast. The sound of his slap was followed by Nella's shocked cry.

He tried at first to explain to her as he did the things he had to do. In a cruel voice he told her he had to—hurt—that he had to hurt her, or he couldn't—

He enjoyed the hopeless way she struggled beneath him. He no longer even remembered her name. The names of his women had never mattered to him in the past. What mattered, the only thing that mattered, was the agony he caused them, firing his own desire as it soared toward a crescendo. The sight of the red welts he had inflicted upon her body was bringing his moment nearer.

As he told her what he wanted her to do, he exulted in the disgust she displayed. Disgust was necessary. His women always had to show disgust. They had to deny him. They had to scream that they wouldn't—that they couldn't! And then he would do things to them with his teeth, and they would beg him to stop, crying out deli-

ciously, their pain a clear bright plain he traversed with pleasure.

Nella screamed again as he struck her jaw with his fist.

They always came around. Some of them only pretended they didn't want to do what he demanded. Some of them, he was convinced, actually enjoyed it, but they had to put up a pretense. He was, after all, Fulton Chapling, and that invariably tipped the scales in his favor.

Her mouth opened in agony, and he filled it, his hips pile-driving against her lips. As he impaled her, his knees crushing her arms, he said the familiar words to her that he had said to so many others throughout all the long years in all the vile beds. He withdrew from her and ordered her on. There were many vistas he had yet to show her. Her tears were as useless as the weak blows she struck. Both intensified his pleasure that bloomed in the compost heap of her disgust. He had to be hated. He had to make his women hate him. When he was sure they did, he could do anything at all because their hate freed him from them.

"Pete!" Nella screamed. "Pete, stop it!"

His moment finally came and went, and he felt futile and lost.

"Pete!" Nella screamed a second time, holding up her hands to defend her bruised face.

His eyes gradually focused and then widened. "Oh, Jesus!" he moaned in horror as he looked down at what he had done. "Oh, sweet Jesus Christ, Nella!"

She spoke his name dully.

"Nella—it wasn't me. I swear it wasn't *me*! I never did nothing like this to a girl in my whole life!"

"It was Chapling," Nella whimpered, her voice barely audible. Blood trickled down her chin. "It must have been Chapling."

"I'll call Farnsworth to come and take care of you."

"No!" Nella's voice was fierce. "Get away from me!"

Pete, staring down in shock at the bruised body beneath him, the body he had so badly battered, realized she was right. He had to get away from her. He had to leave the woman he loved— the woman Chapling hated. He had no

choice. He had to run. Where? It didn't matter. Just away. Away where he could wait until Chapling eventually died a second and final time and he would be free to be only himself again.

He sprang from the bed and cried out, the sound more bestial than human, as he realized what had been done to him. It didn't matter whether Farnsworth had known what might happen. He probably hadn't known. What mattered —and he was now sure of it—was that Farnsworth cared only about Chapling, who knew scientific things and could talk so smart about them.

Hastily, he dressed and, crying, cursing, ran from the room and the injured woman who loved him and who he could now protect only by fleeing from her, carrying in his own mind the terrible form of another's twisted love.

Down the corridor he ran. Past empty offices and beneath blindly burning lights he ran. Through a door and down the stairs.

He ran.

Chapter nine

Pete threw open the door at the bottom of the stairwell and bounded out into the lobby. Down at its end were the huge plate glass doors and standing in front of them was . . .

Black leather jacket. Blue riot helmet. The sleek gleam of a saddle-soaped holster.

Pete halted, watching the policeman watching him. Beyond the policeman was a metal meshwork panel that had not been there when Pete had first arrived at the Center.

As the policeman began to move toward him, Pete stepped forward and said, "I—work here. My name's Bratton. I'm just going out to get a little air is all."

The policeman glittered in his buttons and leather, a human mechanism guided by rules and suspicion. "You need an authorized pass to leave the premises. Let's see your ID card."

"ID card?"

"Everybody at the Center's got one."

Pete reached in his pocket, shook his head in mock chagrin, and said, "I forgot my wallet. I'll go back and get it."

"Hold it right there!"

Pete halted.

The policeman ordered him to turn around. "Over here," he said, indicating the wall. With his hand resting lightly on his holster, the policeman moved toward the intercom panel that connected the lobby with the rest of the Center. "Get me Dr. Farnsworth," he bellowed into the speaker.

Pete sprang forward and sent his right fist flying. As it connected with the policeman's jaw, Pete ran past him and through the glass doors. He rattled the handle of the

meshwork gate but found it locked. He promptly released the handle as a shot sounded, striking the metal high above his head.

"Get me Farnsworth!" the policeman shouted into the speaker. "There's a guy down here who says his name's Bratton. He assaulted me. He hasn't got an ID card on him."

"Listen," Pete pleaded with the policeman. "Listen to me, please. I—" He fell silent, frowning. Then in a calmer voice, he said, "Officer, you can put that gun away while we wait for Dr. Farnsworth."

Both men stood facing one another for several minutes, neither speaking. Then Farnsworth appeared in the lobby, followed by several attendants.

"Ah, Jim," Pete said, in Fulton Chaplin's voice, "it's good to see you. I'm afraid there's been a minor misunderstanding."

Farnsworth halted, studying Pete's face. He began to relax. "It's all right, officer. We'll just take Mr. Bratton back to his room and— Ed, you and Harry take Mr. Bratton upstairs, please."

The two attendants Farnsworth had named stepped forward warily.

"Tell Dr. Sikorsky to administer appropriate sedation," Farnsworth told them and turned to the policeman. "Who is your superior office, may I ask?"

The policeman holstered his gun and replied, "Captain Labianca, sir."

"I asked because I want to personally commend you to Captain Labianca. You did a superb job of maintaining our security here. We're all very grateful to you. If it were not for men like you, the mobs of sick people roaming the streets could easily break in and ruin us. Oh, your name?"

"Farraday, sir. Andrew Farraday."

"Good night, Officer Farraday, and thank you again."

Pete suddenly freed himself from the grip of the attendants who were leading him toward the elevator. He sprang at Farraday. He had almost succeeded in seizing the policeman's gun when one of the attendants, on Farnsworth's shouted order, struck him a heavy blow at the

base of his skull. He staggered forward and began to fall, unable to speak as the floor flew up to meet his face.

When Pete awoke some undetermined amount of time later, he shuddered. The memory of Nella's body, bruised and welted, overwhelmed him with guilt. He tried to banish the vivid vision of it from his mind. It was horrible. And yet . . . And yet, as he thought about it, as he conjured up the image of the thin red lines on her buttocks that his fingernails had made . . . He felt a surge of energy course through him and became aware of his rising desire.

He started to get out of the bed he was in and then remembered the straps. His ankles and wrists were strapped to the bars of the hospital bed. He recalled the brief moments of consciousness he had experienced. He remembered the syringe in Sikorsky's hand and the haunted look in the old man's eyes. He recalled the moment when Sikorsky had injected the extract taken from Brian Moriarity's brain into his abdomen.

He soon found that he knew a great deal about such formerly esoteric items as similes and metaphors. He remembered crying out not long after the injection. "But why me? I was only thirty-eight years old, goddammit! Why did it have to happen to me? To die shouting to God to save me and getting no single word of reply from that anthropomorphic anachronism!"

Eventually, as time passed—how much?—Pete had begun to relax and concentrate on his book that he had to finish. His agent, he recalled, had released portions of it to the press, and it had been enthusiastically applauded in significant sectors of the literary establishment.

He found himself becoming aware of small things, subtle things he had never noticed before. For example, he had never before noticed how slyly Farnsworth's eyes glinted when he talked of the transfers and the data that had already been salvaged for preservation. Pete imagined a snake lying dusty in the sun, dreaming of mice. He listened to the sound of the air sterilization system and heard a clean song sung by a sadly sighing machine.

Hours passed unnoticed. He slept, awoke, slept again.

"Eat this."

A spoon at his lips. Lime jello. Soup. Nurse Murough, emotionless as Sunday morning, methodically cutting bits of lamb from the bone and motherbirding it down his beak.

The recorder was always on. When he felt like it, he outlined his cytological theories that had yet to be proven. Sometimes, for hours on end, he dictated portions of his unfinished book.

" . . . round she was as an apple—no, strike that—round she was as an *early autumn* apple, rolling bawdy—no, *gaudy*—down the Dublin streets with the loud-mouthed and lusting boys forever in pursuit, yearning to—to bite into her to release the hot juices they knew must be lurking within her to flow over and drown—correction—to flow over and *happily* drown them in her delicious next-to-rotten-ripeness . . . "

"I want—" Pete began one day when Farnsworth, and he were alone in the room.

"Yes? What do you want?

Pete strained at the straps binding him. "These—they hurt. Take them off."

Farnsworth came over to the bed. "Not a chance. We don't want any more escapades until our project is successfully completed. We don't want you battering down doors or jumping out windows. You're safe here, after all."

"Safe!"

"The streets have become a battleground. Martial law was declared more than a week ago, and National Guardsmen are patrolling the city. You're much better off where you are."

"You got no right to keep me tied down here like some kind of animal!"

"Only an animal would have treated Nella the way you did!"

"I didn't! It wasn't me! It was Chapling! He took me over. It wasn't really me that did it."

But Farnsworth had disappeared. A moment later he reappeared with a syringe in his hand.

"What's that?" Pete asked suspiciously.

Farnsworth looked from Pete to the syringe which was filled with a murky substance. "This," he said, "is molecular matter extracted from the brain of Charlotte Andrews."

"No!" Pete shouted. *"Don't!"*

"Miss Andrews," Farnsworth continued calmly, "was one of the world's most noted theoretical mathematicians before she died of Virus Y. You may be interested to know that this—" Farnsworth tapped the syringe with a fingernail "—was flown in from Seattle on Air Force One, the President's private plane. Miss Andrews had been working on a classified research project under the auspices of the Department of Defense, in which there has been much high-level interest. Now please don't move. This won't take a second."

"I don't want—"

Farnsworth bent over and pulled up the green hospital gown Pete was once again wearing. "What you want is not our major concern. You must try to understand that. Our major concern is the project and its successful completion. It would be better for all of us if you shared our sense of priorities."

Pete twisted and turned in order to avoid the descending syringe. Farnsworth swore furiously and went to the intercom to summon attendants to help him. The sound of the door opening caused him to turn.

"I told you to stay away from this room," he snapped.

"Nella!" Pete cried. It was the first time he had seen her since the night he had— He flinched at the sight of the bruises that marred the left side of her face. Her lower lip, he noticed, had been cut, and there was a puffiness to the flesh on her neck.

"—but you can see what's been happening to him, Jim," she was saying. "Chapling and Moriarity are destroying *his* personality. Yet you still want to go on and make more transfers until he—!" Nella stopped speaking, closed her eyes, and leaned back against the wall for support.

"What is it, Nella?" Farnsworth inquired. "Don't you feel well?"

"I'm—Jim, you can't keep this up!"

"I have no choice. There simply is no one else."

"You *do* have a choice," Nella argued. "You can stop right now. There is always a choice. You know that, Jim. There is absolutely nothing that says you must proceed with additional transfers."

"Nella, please. Try to think sensibly about this matter. Think for a moment about Pete Bratton. What was he but a down-and-out drifter who would have lived and died without ever having been of any use to himself or to anybody else? But now—now he's important to the world. If any of us manage to survive this holocaust, civilization can move forward again, thanks to Pete Bratton."

"But you can see what's happening to him! Doesn't that matter to you? Doesn't *he* count for anything at all?"

"I think I've already explained my point of view. I suggest that you bear in mind that the material extracted from the donors with which he has been endowed will diminish, given time, and ultimately disappear. Pete Bratton will have served his purpose—and it's a noble one, as I'm sure you will have to agree—and then everything will be as it was before."

"*His* purpose," Nella repeated angrily. "Not his purpose—*yours*! How do you know that the rats used in the early experiments were the same afterward as they were before? *They* certainly couldn't tell anyone. Jim, how do you *know* they were the same as before? I've been reading Professor Shimizu's published papers. The convicts at San Quentin were never given the massive doses of extract that you've given Pete. That reminds me of something else that's been bothering me. Those prisoners all signed releases. Pete hasn't signed one, has he?"

"A technicality."

"Have you notified his mother? Her name and address are on the report I filed after interviewing Pete the first time at that hotel."

Farnsworth turned away impatiently.

"Have you, Jim? Have you notified Inez Bratton that her son is here?"

"No, I haven't. In time—at the right time—I will, of

course. Nella, I told you not to come here. Pete is dangerous—especially where you're concerned."

"He's not!" Nella shouted, pulling away from Farnsworth as he reached for her arm to guide her to the door. "Chapling is! I told you that!"

"It is ridiculous to talk of Chapling *versus* Bratton," Farnsworth said. "Or Moriarity *and* Bratton. There exists but one body and one mind. The one mind has been endowed with additional information, but it remains *one* mind, and it controls the one body that houses it. It was not Chapling who attacked you. It was Pete Bratton!"

"All right! I accept your argument. But let me point out to you that your very argument proves that you are destroying the unique human being that Pete Bratton is. Or was. It may already be too late to reverse the damage you've done."

"Nella—!"

"He was a man," Nella interrupted. "You've made him a guinea pig."

"He was a pygmy!" Farnsworth shouted. "I've made him a superman!"

"A superman strapped to a bed, whose services are for sale to the highest bidder! In his case you were the highest bidder—unfortunately for him."

"That is quite enough, Nella. You are obviously tired. You've been under a strain and—"

"Have I, Jim? What kind of strain do you suppose I've been under? Could it be that to love someone as much as I love you is a strain? Or is the strain the result of the fact that you no longer need me? That's undoubtedly part of it. But only part of it. How do you think I felt when you asked me to seduce Pete? I felt sick, that's how I felt. I only agreed in the end to do it because I thought—I hoped that if I did what you wanted me to do—if I persuaded Pete to stay here so you could—"

She began to laugh, her laughter a joyless sound in the room. "I thought that by doing as you asked, you might find yourself wanting me again.

"So I whored for you. Oh, don't shake your head like that. It's true. His buddy Bronco sold him to you, and I

agreed to guarantee the return on your investment. I'm no better than you are, Jim. We were both out to get what we wanted and to hell with whether anybody else might get hurt in the process. You wanted fame. I wanted you. A man like Pete should be protected against people like us, Jim. There should be some kind of law."

"I asked you to seduce him," Farnsworth said coldly, "because it was the expedient thing to do. He *had* to remain here. What you did—you should commend instead of condemn yourself. Think of what our work means. The best minds of our time—Chapling, Moriarity, Andrews—"

"Andrews? Are you referring to Charlotte Andrews?"

Farnsworth nodded. "I was just about to inject the extract taken from her brain into our friend over there."

Nella's hands rose to her face, her palms coming to rest against her cheeks. She began to shake her head slowly from side to side.

"There will be others as well," Farnsworth said, deliberately ignoring her distress. "Perhaps, Nella, you should consider taking a leave of absence from the project for a time. I happen to have made a number of important contacts within the last month or so, and I'm quite confident I can arrange for you to stay at the President's private retreat. It's been heavily barricaded and is thoroughly safe from attack by any of the roving bands of sick people."

"How many others?"

"What?"

"How many more minds do you intend to transfer to Pete's?"

"There are no others scheduled at the present time," Farnsworth answered. "But Vernon Rogerson has contracted Virus Y and a physicist of his reputation—his knowledge is priceless!"

"Then it's an open-ended situation, isn't it? You have no intention of releasing Pete in the foreseeable future."

"He will remain here as long as he is needed. That may be for some time, I admit, since Virus Y shows no signs of abating. More and more people are becoming ill every day

and thousands are already dead in this country alone. Yes, we will have to detain Bratton for some time to come, I imagine. I've made proper arrangements to permit us to do so."

Nella took a halting step toward Farnsworth, her face pale. She suddenly raised her hand and struck his wrist. The syringe he had been holding throughout their discussion flew from his hand and smashed on the floor.

Fury twisted his features. He struck Nella a stunning blow across the face that sent her reeling backward against the wall. "Do you realize what you've done?" he shouted at her, his eyes afire.

"Yes," Nella replied weakly. "I do." She turned and ran from the room.

"Nella!" Pete shouted after her. "Nella, come back!"

Click!

In the quiet room the sound of the tape recorder being turned off was a stone striking the thick wall of sleep that surrounded Pete. He stirred in the bed, grunted in protest as the restraints restricted his movements, and then he readjusted his body within the now familiar boundaries they imposed upon him.

"Pete."

He fought the intrusion, not wanting to think about the function of nucleoli during the interphase of mitosis, not caring whether he ever finished his book or not.

His name sounded again, an urgent invocation. Someone touched his arm hesitantly. He opened his eyes to another darkness.

"Pete, it's Nella."

He was barely able to make out her figure in the little light slipping under the door and through the window's venetian blinds.

Nella!

She bent over him, the woman he loved, the woman he hated. Suddenly, her body swayed above him. He felt her hand grip his own for support. How hot it was!

"Nella!"

She withdrew her hand. "I'm going to remove the straps, Pete. I've typed out an identification card for you. I've brought your clothes."

Could he believe what she seemed to be saying? As he felt her fumbling with the buckles on the straps that bound him to the bed, he exulted in anticipation of his freedom. He gave no single thought to his genetic research or to the book that he no longer cared to write. Farnsworth has miscalculated, he thought. Nothing mattered to him anymore but freedom. Now it was to be his, a gift being given by a woman he had deliberately degraded. Why was she doing it? Had she perhaps enjoyed what he had done to her that last dark time?

Guilt, he decided. Of course. She was aware that he now knew she had seduced him that first night merely to please Farnsworth. She knew he had been quietly listening to her conversation with Farnsworth, saying nothing, evaluating what he heard. She knew that he knew she had exploited him. Then it followed that this act, this gift of freedom she was about to give him, could only be an attempt to expiate her guilt. That was why she had destroyed the Andrews extract. He smiled in anticipation as he began to massage his wrists which she had freed. Didn't she realize that guilt could not be absolved without suffering a fitting penance?

Once Nella had released the remaining straps encircling his ankles, she lowered the bars on the bed. Pete got up quickly, placed his feet on the floor, and slumped to his knees.

Before he could ask her for help, she was kneeling on the floor beside him. She helped him get back on his feet. He held on to the bed and began to vigorously massage the muscles in his legs with his free hand.

"Thank you," he said.

"You're welcome," she replied, no emotion evident in her voice. "It's the last—I mean, the least I can do for you."

An odd but perhaps significant error. The *last* things she could do for him? "Something's wrong," he said. "What is it?"

Without hesitation she replied, "I've contracted Virus Y. I first suspected it this afternoon. I intended to leave the Center at once, but I had to talk to Jim first. I wanted to stop him—well, you heard. I failed. Freeing you was the only other thing I could do. You'd better get dressed."

Pete's mind blazed as he put on his clothes and pulled on his boots. So he had been wrong. It wasn't guilt that drove her. Then what? Could it be that she still loved him after what he had done to her?

"You're wondering why I'm doing this," Nella commented from the darkness. "You're wondering why I'm taking the risk, considering the way you treated me the other night. I'm doing it because I want you to be the way you were before Jim began the transfers. I don't want you to be subjected to any more of them. I'm doing this to save Pete Bratton. Not the Pete Bratton you are now but the one you were. The one you will eventually become again, according to Jim."

"You are doing it for the Pete Bratton you loved."

"Forget I ever said that. You didn't understand it at the time, and I doubt that you understand it now."

"You lied? It wasn't true?"

"Of course, it was true. But there are all kinds and degrees of love. The love I felt for you was not the kind that would have led to our having a life together. We are two very different kinds of people. It wouldn't have worked. You may not have realized that then, but surely you must understand now."

"Yes, now I do. Now I know the truth." Something within him had died, and he could not name it, but he felt intense regret for its passing. A part of him mourned whatever it was, even as he thought of what he could do to Nella once they were beyond the walls of this fortress. He said, "I'm sorry, Nella."

"Do you mean you're sorry that I'm sick? If you do, I can only say that so am I. But never mind that now. Come on. We'd better use the stairs instead of the elevator. There will be less chance of our meeting anyone that way. Stefan called an emergency meeting of the staff on some pretense after I told him what I intended to do and why.

He felt it would give you a better than average chance to escape."

The news both pleased and annoyed Pete. On the one hand, he was grateful to Sikorsky for aiding Nella's action on his behalf, but on the other hand, he felt a sense of betrayal. A man like Sikorsky, he firmly believed, should know that science came first above all else. But Sikorsky's weakness, he reminded himself, means my survival.

There was no one in the hall when they emerged from the room. Pete had to shut his eyes against the brightness of the overhead lights after the darkness of his room.

They made their way down the corridor, their eyes on the distant door with the red exit sign. They finally reached it and started down the stairs. Pete opened his mouth to say something, but Nella put her fingers over his lips and whispered that the lobby was just ahead—through that fire door a few feet ahead of them.

As they came out into the lobby's expanse of marble floors and paneled walls, Pete saw the policeman standing in the small foyer between the glass doors and the metal meshwork bordering the street. He was grateful it wasn't the same man he had encountered on his previous attempt to escape.

Nella, he realized, was already several feet beyond him, walking briskly toward the policeman on guard at the door. She turned and beckoned. "Come *on!*" she called back to him. "We're late for the meeting already. Hurry!"

She went up to the policeman, ostentatiously glancing at her watch and frowning at Pete over her shoulder. As the policeman was checking her ID card and entering her name in his log book, she said, "It isn't still raining, is it? I've lost my only umbrella."

Without looking up, the policeman told her that the rain had stopped an hour ago. He laughed and told her she was just like his wife. In the two years he'd been married, he said, his wife must have lost at least a gross of umbrellas. He reached for Pete's card and began to write the name on it in his logbook.

"Peter Bratton," he said, staring at the name he had

written. "I don't think we have your name on our authorized personnel list, Mr. Bratton."

"Call Dr. Farnsworth right away," Nella said.

Pete stared at her in surprise.

"Mr. Bratton," she went on, "is Dr. Farnsworth's brother-in-law. Dr. Farnsworth will have someone's head since he ordered Mr. Bratton's name added to the list this morning."

"Farnsworth, huh?" the policeman said. "Well, I guess there's no need to bother the doctor about this. I'll put Mr. Bratton's name on the authorized list myself."

"Thank you!" Nella called back to him after he had unlocked the gate and she and Pete had stepped out onto the sidewalk. "Tell Dr. Farnsworth for me that he would be well-advised to supervise his staff more carefully in the future to prevent such slip-ups."

Pete had to run to keep up with her as she hurried down the street. When she reached the corner, she darted into the doorway of a darkened shop. "Oh, my God," she moaned, leaning against one of the plate glass windows. "I forgot to add your name to the personnel list." She caught her breath and moved out of the doorway.

"Wait! Where are you going?"

Before she could answer Pete, she swayed and then collapsed on the sidewalk.

Pete ran to her and raised her head. Her eyes were partially open, and she was mumbling something he couldn't understand. Her body was rigid, and it burned beneath his hands. Fever, he thought. He looked up and down the street. Empty. No, not altogether empty. In the distance someone was moving slowly. He was about to call out, but he stopped himself when he saw that the man was wearing a military uniform and carrying a gun.

What was it Sikorsky had said the night he had come to Nella's apartment? *The soldiers are shooting the sick.* He looked down at Nella, and as he did so, she suddenly cried out. Great birds, she claimed, were dropping down upon her from a bloody sky.

As her words pierced the night, Pete saw the soldier turn sharply and raise his gun.

He picked Nella up and began to run down the street. She was murmuring now, and he hoped she would not cry out again. He turned the corner and paused for breath. There was a building across the street, a brownstone, and he quickly made his way toward it.

He had chosen it mainly because it was there. But there had been another reason. It looked abandoned. Its door had been shattered and was hanging precariously by only one intact hinge. Looters, he guessed. As he went up the steps and into the building's dark interior, he knew that he had guessed right. Furniture lay smashed in the living room of the house. A slashed oil painting hung askew, and the wall safe that had hidden behind it was scarred, and its dial had been ripped away.

He placed Nella gently on the floor and made his way back to the building's entrance. He pulled the door shut, a gesture he recognized was futile since the door could no longer be locked. But it gave him a welcome feeling of security, however illusionary.

He tried a light switch. The overhead lights went on in the living room.

He was searching through the rooms on the second floor for something that might be used as a bed for Nella when he heard her begin shouting below him. He bounded down the steps and managed to seize her as she ran toward the front door.

She tried to fight him off, but he managed to drag her back into the living room. He held one hand over her mouth until she finally stopped struggling, and then he removed it. She made no sound. He saw that she had fallen into a deep sleep that was not unlike a coma. Her breathing was barely detectable, and her body had become limp.

He lowered her to the floor and went back up the stairs to collect the blankets he had discovered in a linen closet. Once downstairs again, he used the blankets to create a makeshift pallet for Nella.

He gently placed her on it, hoping she would sleep through the rest of the night. He sat down on the floor beside her and stared in confusion at the body of the woman lying on it. Why hadn't he let her remain where she had

collapsed on the street? Why had he bothered to bring her here? Something he almost remembered had made him do it. But it was a ridiculous thing to do. It made no sense. It was a dumb thing to do.

Wasn't it?

Yes, dammit, it was.

Then why?

Chapter ten

During the night Nella awoke and screamed.

Pete was torn free of the dream in which he had been submerged by her cry. He couldn't think for a moment where he was. But then he remembered and scuttled across the bare floor to where she was crouching, her hands fisted in front of her face, her eyes glazed.

"Stop it!" he shouted, shaking her by the shoulders as she screamed again.

" . . . trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored," she began to croon, rocking from side to side.

"Nella, please be quiet. Okay?"

But she would not be quiet. His words had no effect on her as he pleaded with her, as he warned her that there were soldiers on the streets.

"The nuns," she said, "gave me a little picture once. It was of a shepherd and a lamb, and they said that the shepherd—I've lost the picture."

Pete got up and ran upstairs, taking the steps two and three at a time. He returned carrying a bedsheet, which he tore into strips and used to bind her hands and feet. He stuffed a wad of the cloth into her mouth.

She turned her head to one side as if seeking someone who had moved out of her line of vision.

Pete sat down on the floor, his legs crossed under him, feeling helpless and wondering what to do next. He was so tired. But what he felt was something more than tiredness. His feeling was rooted in a sense of irreparable loss.

While he slept, he seemed to have changed. But how? He couldn't say. And yet there was something—a dim

memory of a memory. Something important, something about—cytology. He remembered his book. He guessed he would never write it now. Cytology? Now what the hell was that? He'd known what it was once. Or was he just imagining that he had known what the word meant? Maybe his book was about cytology. No, it wasn't. His book was about a girl who had been born in the slums of Dublin, a woman with hips like rolling hills and the ancient wisdom of Eve in her eyes.

In the thin light of the almost-arrived dawn Pete noticed how sad Nella looked. Why was she looking at him like that? "I'll take that gag out of your mouth," he told her, "if you promise not to holler. Please, Nella, no more hollering, okay?"

You sound—" she began drily when he had removed the gag. "You sound—different."

"So do you," he said. "You sure were raising hell there for a while. You feeling better now?"

"Yes, but it will happen to me again, Pete. I saw such terrible visions. I heard voices in the distance. They called my name. Pete, you know what is happening to me, don't you?"

He would not answer her.

"Impeded lymphatic flow," she said. "It results in too little oxygen in the bloodstream. The reduced oxygenation in the brain causes the hallucinations."

"Goddammit!" He dropped his head into his hands. "Nella, I can't stand—"

"I know. You'd better go. Just leave me here. There's nothing you can do to help me now."

He swore again. "That's what's so awful! If I could only *do* something! Listen, I'll untie you. I can at least do that. I only tied you up to keep you from running—out there."

They sat in silence for a time after he had untied her.

Then Nella asked, "What's wrong?"

He waved a hand. "Nothing. Only—"

"Only what?"

"What's cytology, do you know?"

She let out a little gasp. "Pete," she ventured, "do you know what the letters DNA represent?"

"DNA? No, I don't guess I do. Should I?"

Nella seized his hand. "He's dead!" she cried. "Chapling's dead! Pete, don't you see? DNA means deoxyribonucleic acid. Chapling would have known what the letters represented. He's gone!"

"Chapling?"

"You don't remember Fulton Chapling?"

"Fulton Chapling," Pete repeated softly. "I—no—Wait a minute. Yeah, I remember him. He was the first one Farnsworth transferred, and then there was Moriarity. Funny, I'd almost forgotten. You wouldn't think I could forget a thing like that, would you?"

Maybe that was the source of the sense of loss he had been feeling—the disappearance of Chapling's mind from his own.

"Moriarity will go next," Nella said. "Then—then you'll be fine, Pete."

He shook his head and avoided looking at her. "No, I won't. Maybe it would be okay, being the kind of guy I was before, if only you and I—if only I didn't—" No more words would come. He was a fool for trying to tell her—she was already dead. They both knew it. It was only a matter of time until the body in which she existed became crusted with the rubine protruberances that turned the victims of Virus Y into glittering mockeries of what had once been human.

"Pete!"

"What? Nella, what's wrong?" He suddenly realized that the hallucinations were beginning again, because her face had contorted, and her hand was rising to point nervously over his shoulder.

But there was no one in the doorway. He put his arm around her and held her close to him. She tried desperately to break free as he held her, his face hidden against her shoulder.

He continued to hold her, trying hard not to hear her begging him to save her from Fulton Chapling who was there, who was coming toward her, who was coming with cruel hands and eyes the color of ice.

He wanted to release her, run from her, hide from the

sudden sound of her agonized howling. No, *he* wasn't the one who wanted to run, he realized. It was Moriarity. Moriarity, he had long ago discovered, had made a career out of marrying women and then divorcing them when they could be of no further use to him, when they could offer him no haven for a heart too sensitive to stand strife and tolerate pain. Always for Brian Moriarity there had been only one solution to any crisis. Leave it behind. But this was Nella and he was— Who? He added his voice to Nella's, his words muffled against her shoulder, as he called on God to damn Moriarity, to crucify Farnsworth, to blast a world in wich love died and only phoenixes were immortal.

Even as he thought them, he knew the words were not really his own. It was bitterly ironic, he thought, that he, Pete Bratton, who had never known how to praise with words the stone-jawed John Wayne, could now speak of phoenixes in a looted room where no one listened to him.

If only, he thought, Bronco had not liked money so much. If only my own body had been as vulnerable as were all the thousands of others who had fallen beneath the onslaught of Virus Y. If only Farnsworth had been able to look at me even once as a real person and not merely as a means to a self-serving end. If but one thing had changed, he would be somewhere else now. He would not be here, holding death in his arms while the sun eased up into the sky beyond the windows without noticing the bizarre coupling it could never warm.

He whispered words to Nella, fighting the impulse that had once belonged to another man to push her away from him, the impulse that made him want to rise and run from this room, this entire senseless world.

Suddenly, he found himself wanting to hear her call him by his name if only one more time. If she would do that, he was sure he would not feel so alone and so lost. "Nella," he said, "it's me. It's Pete."

"Look out!" she shouted. "He has a gun!"

Pete gave up trying. He could only hold her. It was not enough, but it was all he could do.

"He's going to shoot!"

"Nella—"

"Look!"

Something odd about her voice struck him. He released her and turned in the direction she was pointing.

"On your feet!" the soldier ordered, his rifle slanting down toward where Pete and Nella huddled together like children caught in forbidden games.

Pete started to rise, but Nella pulled him back toward her.

"She's sick," he told the soldier. He's just a kid, he thought, staring up at the boy whose body bore the artifacts of war and suggested dimly a childhood too abruptly ended.

"I know," the soldier said. "You two do this?" He indicated the damaged furniture.

"No," Pete answered. "We just came in here to sleep. We had no other place to go."

"She should have reported to the detention camp over on Staten Island," the soldier said almost petulantly. "You're supposed to report as soon as you know you're sick. Or else relatives are supposed to turn the infected person in. You her husband?"

"Just a friend."

"You know what happens if they don't turn themselves in. I don't make the rules, you know. But I got my job. Listen, I don't like it, but I got to do it. Everybody in the whole world will drop dead if infected persons aren't detained."

"I didn't know about the camp on Staten Island," Pete said quickly. "Honest, I didn't know."

"It's been in the paper the government's putting out since all the other ones folded up. It's been broadcast on the radio, too—on the Civil Defense station. You must've known about the camp."

"I'll take her to Staten Island," Pete said. He rose and bent over to help Nella to her feet. "I'll take her over there right now."

"I'm assigned to one of the CC Patrols," the soldier said nervously, scuffing one foot against the other.

"CC Patrol?"

"Contagion Control." The soldier stepped back and raised his rifle. "It's all explained in the directive put out by the Army." He hesitated and then, obviously quoting, said, "Infected personnel found outside established detention centers are subject to immediate disposal to insure the protection of uncontaminated citizens."

Pete stiffened. "Listen, it's okay. I can't catch it from her because I'm immune. Look, let us go. I'll take her to the camp right now."

"Immune? Did you say immune?"

"Yeah. So it's okay, see?" Pete began to move toward the doorway, leading Nella by the hand.

"What's your name?"

"Bratton," Pete answered without hesitation.

"*Pete* Bratton?"

Pete realized he had made a mistake. He had to get Nella away from the rifle and the nervous soldier.

"You're the guy everybody's been looking for!" the soldier exclaimed. "Damned if you aren't! All of us on CC Patrol were ordered to be on the lookout for you. They got a tri-state alarm out on you. Okay, just you hold it right there where you are. Now let the lady go and stand over there next to the wall."

"*No!*" Pete yelled.

A bullet burned into the floor at his feet. Nella screamed and ran toward the rear of the room. The soldier fired again before Pete could move. Nella's arms flew up. Her body arched backward, and then she half-turned, reaching out toward Pete before falling heavily to the floor.

Her unmoving body was the only thing in Pete's world for a long moment, and then acting without rational thought, he sprang at the soldier and knocked him to the floor. He raised his foot and kicked viciously at the boy's helmeted head. He dropped to his knees and seized the boy's throat in his hands and began to squeeze. When the bloody face below him went white and the eyes closed, Pete released his grip and slowly got to his feet. Unsteadily, he made his way to where Nella was lying. He stood

looking down at her lifeless body for a moment, and then he turned and ran from the room.

As he came hurtling through the outer door, he saw the other two Guardsmen racing toward the building. They had heard the shots, he realized. He leaped over the iron railing bordering the steps and began to run up the street away from the soldiers, who had stopped when the spotted him.

He looked back over his shoulder as he ran and saw the soldier he thought he had murdered stagger out onto the landing in front of the brownstone, point at him, and shout hoarsely to the Guardsmen who were raising their rifl

"It's Bratton! Don't kill him! They want him alive!"

Pete raced on, the sound of his name being shouted by his pursuers an alarming song in his ears.

He ran past the abandoned cars and the shattered glass of windows behind which charred mannequins reeled. On he went, totally unaware of the damaged crosswalk light that flashed erratically. WALK/DON'T WALK/ WALK/WALK/ WALK.

Several shots sounded, but he ran on. He looked back and saw that they were still after him, their canteens bouncing on their hips, the grenades on their belts glinting leaden in the sunlight. One soldier held a walkie-talkie to his mouth.

More soldiers in a jeep were careening down the street toward him. He started back the way he had come, his heart pounding, his mouth dry.

The Guardsmen had multiplied. They were coming now from all directions in jeeps and on foot.

"Kill the bastard!" an old man suddenly shrieked from a broken tenement window. "Get all the infected off the streets. *Shoot*, dammit!"

The thought struck Pete that the old man with blood on his mind was the first person he had seen, except for soldiers since leaving the building where he and Nella had hidden.

As the Guardsmen came closer, he raced down the

steps of a subway entrance and hurdled the gray sawhorses at the foot of the stairs, ignoring the impotent stenciled warning that ordered him not to cross this police line.

A train! If only a train would come in time! He saw the toppled train that lay across the tracks, its automatic doors burst open, its windows empty of glass. He realized that the power must be shut off in the system. Only a few begrimed light bulbs burned and they, he guessed, were probably hooked into a reserve generator activated only in emergencies.

He leaped from the concrete platform and began to run down the tracks and into the tunnel, squinting in the gloom. He came to a connecting tunnel and doubled back in an attempt to elude the Guardsmen. But they didn't seem to be after him any longer.

Except for the dull thudding sound of his own footsteps, it was quiet in the tunnel. He heard the faint plop of water dripping somewhere in the distance, and once as he followed the tracks deeper into the gloom, he accidentally ambushed a cat that had been sleeping unseen in an alcove. It ran wailing away from him.

At last, some distance from the nearest light bulb's dull glow, he stopped and leaned back against the damp wall. He closed his eyes and concentrated on controlling his breathing, which was causing his chest to heave and his stomach to lurch. Where was he? He opened his eyes but could see little else besides the filth of the walls and the litter on the tracks. He let himself slide down the wall until he was sitting on the packed earth beneath the ties supporting the tracks. He placed his forearms on his knees and rested his head on them.

Nella was dead, he thought dully. So was that scientist whose name slipped his mind at the moment. He remembered that there had been a second man—he remembered the needle in Farnsworth's hand, remembered it descending toward his abdomen . . . Who was the other man, the second one? A guy who had something to do with writing. Newspaper man? What difference did it make? What difference did anything make? His answer to that question made him laugh out loud, a harsh sound in the stillness.

Nothing made any difference as far as he could tell. A man was born, he had himself a few good years if he was lucky, and then he died. Or if he wasn't so lucky, he had himself a few good years, and then he ended up hiding in a subway tunnel from soldiers who probably wished they could just shoot him down and save themselves a whole lot of trouble.

Nella was dead. Well, he couldn't help that. There wasn't anybody who could have saved her. He had no reason to sit here feeling like a first class shit because she had died and he couldn't stop her from dying because she had Virus —— Wait! She didn't die from Virus Y. She was *killed!* She was murdered! She died of a bullet in the back, that's what she died of! He rubbed his forehead, but it didn't help. He had seen the soldier shoot her. So why had he been thinking she'd died of the sickness?

He wished the soldiers would just let him alone. But he knew they wouldn't. They had their orders. What would happen, he found himself wondering, if some chicken colonel told all his troops to go piss in the ocean? Hell, they'd do it, that's what would happen. They'd all line up smart on the sand and whip out their dicks and piss themselves dry. Because orders were orders.

He laughed to himself. He was crazy, thinking things like that. He was also mighty damn hungry. When had he eaten last? He couldn't recall. He looked around him. Nothing. Nothing walls, nothing tracks, nothing dirt all over everything . . .

He had to— He had to what exactly? Get out of the tunnel. Okay, that would be a start. Then what? Go back to visit Inez maybe. Knock on her door, and when she opened it, tell her to break out the booze because her best beau had come home at last and that seemed to him to be a big enough reason to celebrate at least one whole Saturday night right straight through.

He couldn't believe it. But it was true. He was sobbing, and he couldn't stop. He couldn't stop the way his face was getting all wet or the way his shoulders were shaking or the way his lips were twisting and his hands tearing through his hair.

Nella was dead, and he couldn't stand knowing that she was. He wished he had just let her lay there on the sidewalk when she'd collapsed on him. He should have just walked away from her and never even looked back. That way—if he'd been smart enough to do that—he wouldn't have had to be there when the bullet—when she turned around and looked at him in that awful way that last time. He wouldn't have to *know!* He could have imagined her years later—dancing, maybe. Or getting married in a church with candles burning. He shouldn't have stuck with her. It was a dumb thing to do.

Oh, goddam her for dying on him! Goddam her for saying she loved him and then dying on him!

He bit down hard on his knuckles and squeezed his eyes shut. He ought to be ashamed of himself. Somebody ought to come along and whip his ass good for goddaming Nella. It wasn't her fault that she had died.

Things like that just happened. Things had been happening to him all his life, and he was pretty sure they were going to keep on happening to him. The important thing, though, was to remember what had happened to him, thanks to Nella—the important thing was to remember that it *had* happened and be glad about it. It had been a good thing, and nobody now could make it not happen. She had said she loved him, and if hers wasn't exactly the kind of love he had been hoping for, it was still love of some kind. That ought to make him think good of himself, even if he wasn't as tough or as smart as a lot of other people.

Nella had said she loved him, and she must have seen something worthwhile about him, even if he wasn't too sure what that something was.

Once he got himself out of this situation he was in, once he got alone somewhere safe, then he'd sit down and make a plan. He'd—he'd take a piece of paper and write down on it what he could do. That was it! He'd make a list! He'd make a list of what he could do, and then he'd cross off the jobs he didn't want, like dishwashing, and finally he'd come down to the one job left on the list that he really wanted, and then he'd spend some more

time thinking slow and careful about the best way to go about getting that one really good job that was left on the list. He'd take it step by step, which was the only way. Up till now he'd just sort of gone along, taking whatever came, and not thinking much farther than the next day, if that far.

But a guy had to think a whole lot farther than that if he was going to amount to something. If a guy wanted to meet a girl someday and have her say what Nella had said to him, a man had to have a plan that would work. After he met the girl, who would probably be pretty, they'd buy a house somewhere, a small one to start off with, and soon the kids would start coming, and there'd be things to do—the faucets would probably leak from time to time, and he'd have to learn how to fix the holes in the roof before winter came.

He guessed it was because of Nella that he was thinking this way—making plans. Somehow, she had made it possible for him to think this way that was brand new for him. It was as if her feeling the way she had about him had turned him around and made him take a fresh look at himself. And what he saw wasn't the Pete Bratton he'd been fairly familiar with for years but this new fellow who looked the same on the outside but who had changed deep down inside where most people couldn't see.

He stood up and began moving briskly along the tracks, searching for an exit. It wouldn't do to just walk out through one of the ordinary station entrances. That wouldn't be at all smart. Maybe there was some other way out. There must be, because if a train had an accident, there must be some way to get all the people out other than through the regular entrances.

He walked on, wanting to whistle but playing it cool and keeping quiet.

The sound of a shot.

At first he thought that what he saw swirling up ahead in the dim light of the tunnel was smoke. Steam, maybe. But he soon found out that it wasn't smoke, and it wasn't steam. When it engulfed him, it made his eyes water, and his throat burn. He began to cough. It was gas, that's what

it was. Tear gas! They were shooting it down into the tunnel, and he could barely breathe because of it. He began to run back the way he had come but found that more gas was billowing all the way back there. He heard the *thup-thup* of something bouncing behind him and saw another tear gas canister the soldiers had fired to flush him out.

He pulled his handkerchief from his pocket and held it over his nose, but it didn't help. The fumes seared his throat, and his eyes ached as water flowed from them. He turned and ran back the way he had come, searching for an exit. He had to find one before his nose choked up altogether so he couldn't breathe at all.

When he came at last to a platform, he bounded coughing up the stone steps leading to it, slammed through the turnstile barely visible in the clouds of gas, and staggered, gasping, up the steps into the clean, sunny air.

A shout went up. Strong hands gripped his arms.

He dropped his handkerchief. He knew, without being able to see who was holding him so tight, that they were soldiers. He knew because they talked dirty—something about having had to bust their balls for the sake of a civilian they couldn't care less about—and because they wouldn't let him bend down to pick up his handkerchief to wipe his streaming eyes.

Dr. Sikorsky impatiently shoved Nurse Murough aside and completed the cleansing of Pete's eyes himself.

Pete was once again wearing a green hospital gown as he sat in the straight-backed chair in the isolation room to which the attendant had brought him after his return to Crisis Control Center.

"Do you want more oxygen?" Sikorsky asked him, offering the mask.

"Don't do me any favors, Doc. What difference did it ever make to you people what I want? The only person I ever made a real difference to was Nella. If she hadn't been shot down in cold blood by that hard-assed kid, we could have—"

"Pete, I just don't understand you," Farnsworth inter-

rupted angrily. "You readily agreed to participate in our attempt to save the priceless knowledge of our donors. You volunteered to—"

"But I never signed no paper!"

"I grant you that," Farnsworth said. "But we had a verbal agreement. That may not be the most satisfactory premise from which to proceed, but I can only point out to you that such a verbal agreement was indeed made. We have witnesses to prove it."

Pete looked up at Farnsworth. "That verbal agreement of mine—as of now, I take it back."

"I'm afraid that is no longer possible," a uniformed man with medals on his chest declared.

"Sure, it's possible," Pete said. "There's such a thing as medical ethics. Farnsworth said so himself when he tried to talk me into staying. He said he couldn't make me stay here if I didn't want to."

The man who had spoken, a brigadier general, said, "This operation is now being conducted under the auspices of the Department of Defense in conjunction with the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. It is subject to the rules governing such research. Those rules, Mr. Bratton, are made by the departments involved and are amended when necessary to suit altered circumstances."

"Doc," Pete said, addressing Sikorsky, "just what the hell is he talking about?"

"He's saying," Sikorsky replied with obvious reluctance, "that you have been—conscripted by the government to serve the purposes of this project."

"I've been *drafted?* They can't do that! I already been in the Marines."

"The one thing has nothing to do with the other, I'm afraid," Sikorsky said. "The government has decided that your immunity—well, that you have no personal choice in the matter. It is now a matter of the national interest."

"You mean you can start giving me more of those injections any time you want to? Whether I say okay or not?"

"That's right," Sikorsky replied.

"Individual rights," Farnsworth observed, "are one thing. In a national emergency those rights must be waived to serve the greater good of the nation and its citizens."

"What about *my* greater good?" Pete yelled at Farnsworth, blinking from the pain that remained in his eyes despite Sikorsky's ministrations. "Listen, I'll tell you something. What you did to me before, it messed up my mind. I forget things I used to know."

"Everyone forgets things now and then," Farnsworth commented.

"What I'm talking about isn't the same thing as that. It's as if who I am gets lost somewhere because of all the other new stuff that I know about because of those injections. Then when the new stuff dies out, part of me seems to go with it. No, sir. You can talk all you want to about a national emergency and like that, but I still got my rights."

"Let me introduce myself, if I may."

The man who had spoken was tall, well over six feet, and solidly constructed. Pete thought he looked like he could use a day or two in the sun because his face was as white as an egg.

"My name is Nelson Cannon, and I'm employed by the Department of Justice."

"You're a lawyer?"

"Yes, Mr. Bratton, I am. I'm here to tell you that you will not be allowed to leave the Center until the current project has been successfully completed. I have with me a copy of the court order which—"

"Hold on. A guy I used to work with in Detroit, he told me— This friend of mine was arrested one time, and he called up a lawyer he knew, and the lawyer made the cops let my friend go. The lawyer said the cops had no right to hold him. Now in my case—"

"You are referring to a writ of habeas corpus," Cannon said. "Such a writ is inoperative in your case due to the special circumstances involved. It is another normal constitutional guarantee that has been temporarily suspended because of the crisis we are facing."

They way I see it, you can't keep me here without violating my civil rights."

"All civil rights have been temporarily suspended under the current state of martial law," Cannon responded. "But Mr. Bratton, let me ask you to look at this matter from another angle. Could it not be argued that your civil right in this particular case is simply to remain here and cooperate in this endeavor? Could it not be considered not only your civil right but your civil duty as well?"

Pete shifted position in his chair. They were pinning him down, no doubt about it. They seemed to have set the game up so that their side couldn't help winning. Everything he thought of trying—they had thought of it first and changed the rules, so he didn't have a chance. He was having trouble understanding how he had gotten himself into this mess in the first place. Bronco. It was Bronco's fault, he thought. No, that wasn't true. Because Farnsworth was right. He *had* agreed to stay and let them transfer those two brains to him. Then there had been Nella, and he had wanted to hang around because of her. It wasn't until he'd beat up on her that he'd tried to get out of this place, because he'd recognized the terrible thing that was happening to him. But by then it was too late. And now—Well, with lawyers and generals and doctors all on the same side, it didn't look like his team was going to score, considering that he was its only member. Even Sikorsky couldn't be counted on to play on his side. Maybe Sikorsky wasn't exactly happy about playing on their side, but he couldn't be counted on to switch over now.

Pete heard the key turning to unlock the door of the room, and he tensed. Someone was coming in. Well, someone was going out, too. He leaped to his feet, threw a punch at Farnsworth, sent Nelson Cannon banging back against the wall, and ran out the door.

And into the arms of two policemen standing guard in the hall. They dragged him back into the room.

Farnsworth was shouting to someone for sedation. Everybody else was leaving, not looking back.

The needle biting into his arm.

The room drifting, whirling.

Sleep.

A windy dream of shutters banging on an abandoned

house—no, not abandoned—for on its steps, in a flowered apron, a girl, her hair the color of bumble bees, calling to him to come home, calling "Pete!" over and over again and no one answering her . . .

In the days that followed, he did nothing much except think about the lock on the door and the bars they had installed on the windows. He turned on the TV, but there were no programs being broadcast anymore.

In time they brought him books because he had asked for them. Vernon Rogerson, the noted physicist, had always been a great reader, and now that they had transferred molecular matter taken from Rogerson's brain to his, he read books. Rogerson did. Pete did. They did.

He tried refusing to eat for a time.

They brought tubes and bottles, and they hung the bottles on clothes racks, and they taped needles to his arms to feed him.

People came and went, came and went—nurses, Farnsworth, doctors he had never seen before. Sikorsky, who wouldn't look him in the eye.

He began to make notes. It became important for him to make notes. There was his investigation into the theory of antimatter . . .

In time, he was allowed to operate the tape recorder himself. He developed a system for cataloging his tapes that Farnsworth called brilliant.

They told him, when he thought to ask one day, that it was October.

So little time and he had so much still to do.

In November *she* had so much to do. She had to complete the cantata she had barely begun when she became sick. In November her name was Marita Allegrette, and she had been fond of olives and men much taller than she was. She asked for a piano—she couldn't compose without a piano—one was brought, a Steinway, and she played . . .

Sleep.

Dreams, seldom, but those dark ones that sometimes came caused an awakening accompanied by screams.

His names changed. Carlo Macedonio. Inga Svenson. Mboto Ubo. Clement Dearing.

They came, an army trooping invisible in the syringes carried by Sikorsky. They flared alive in the mind of the man imprisoned in the room with the bars on the windows and the lock on the door.

The world turned, and the soundless snows of December fell.

"You can't Jim!" Sikorsky in the distance. "Even *one* more will burn him out completely!"

But Farnsworth insisted, and Sikorsky succumbed and brought the one more filled syringe, and the burning away of the man in the room made no smoke at all, and yet Sikorsky's eyes watered.

The next day someone in the room, some unimportant person said to someone else, *"Yeah, Sikorsky opened the arteries in his wrists with his own scalpel. Bled to death in his bathtub. He was probably drunk. But what I wonder is why did he do it? He was Farnsworth's right-hand man. He'd become almost as well known as Farnsworth himself because of the project."*

The important person, the man in whose room the two unimportant people were, did not look up from his notes on the development of a radically different hydroponic solution or ask why someone named Sikorsky had committed suicide. Or care. Because he didn't recognize the name.

People came and went like the days through the door that now was no longer locked. He worked, thought. So much to do. Now if he applied this peculiarly pesky mathematical formula to the problem . . .

Someone some months later saying that it was ending, thank God. The epidemic was dying out. Statistics showed reduced deaths per thousand in the surviving population of the world. Down four whole percentile since March! No one knew why.

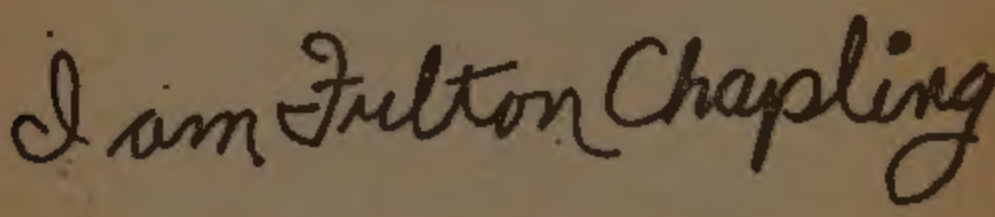
In early June, a time of no roses in New York City's concrete and glass garden, with most of the staff, including the internationally celebrated Dr. James Farnsworth gone on to important new assignments elsewhere, the specially trained nurse assigned to him by the new head of the re-

named Medical Research Center said, "Try once more. I *know* you can do it."

So he tried again. He began to write on the paper with the pencil she had given him, his tongue imprisoned between his teeth.

At last he finished his task this one more time and held the paper out of her, his eyes dull but his expression hopeful.

She took it from him and read what he had written.



His nurse shook her head sadly and returned the paper to him.

"I'm not Fulton Chapling?" he asked her, a familiar fear chilling him once again. "Then who—?"

"You are Pete Bratton." She spelled both his first and last names for him slowly, emphasizing each letter. "Now then," she said, "let's try it again, shall we? We'll get it right this time, won't we?"

But he didn't.

He was a man – but they changed him into a guinea pig

The world is dying. A disease more terrible than cancer ravages its populance. Scientists struggle while people die in their thousands. There is no known cure.

Pete Bratton was a simple man. A drifter who let life nudge him from one day to the next. A Nowhere Man in a world of pre-destination and disease. A man who should have died, but who survived the terror of Virus Y and became a phenomenon. A human guinea pig for eager scientists to store the ideology of a dying civilization by memory transfer.

But what of the real Pete Bratton stripped of his rights as a free individual and strapped to an operating table for the cause of Science?

And what of his own mind as it slowly dissolves into a jumble of conflicting ideas and personalities?

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